

# Grace as Taught by Augustine and Luther

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## Introduction to Augustine

Church historians know more about Augustine than about any other Church Father. His writings were carefully preserved and disseminated in his own lifetime. They were very personal and introspective and through them Augustine gives us a good deal of information on his own life. Also, one of his contemporaries, a fellow bishop by the name of Possidius, wrote his biography.

Augustine was born in Tagaste, a city in northern Africa on November 13, 354. His father Patricius was a member of the city council, an unbeliever and unfriendly toward Christianity until shortly before the end of his life. His mother Monica was a Christian. Although her Christianity may have lacked depth, it did not lack intensity. It was to her prayers that Augustine later gave the credit for his becoming a Christian. Augustine's early exposure to Catholic Christianity was minimal. Following the custom of the day he was not baptized. He was enrolled as a catechumen shortly before his sixteenth birthday.

Both of his parents were ambitious for him, and tried to give him the best education possible. He went to school in Tagaste and "although he was a talented youth, he was also trifling, inattentive, lazy and an enemy of Greek."<sup>1</sup> (Take heart, NWC students!) He did excel, though. His Father sent him to Madaura to study literature and then to Carthage to study rhetoric in preparation for a legal career. There in Carthage he took a mistress and in the summer of 372 his son Adeodatus was born.

A major change in his life occurred at age 19. While at Carthage he read a book by Cicero, the *Hortensius*. "Thereafter a new ideal arose in his soul; he had already dreamed-and it was then only a dream—to give up everything for the truth. 'Suddenly, every vain hope became worthless to me and I yearned with unbelievable ardor of heart for the immortality of wisdom.'"<sup>2</sup> By now Augustine had become well known for his rhetorical abilities and he would continue to develop his literary abilities. But from age 19 on, teaching rhetoric was merely his way of supporting himself. His main quest was for truth.

The beginning of his thirst for truth coincided with his becoming a Manichean. He would remain one of their disciples for 9 years. At 29 Augustine left Carthage for Rome. By this time he had become disillusioned with Manicheism and was open for a change. The period between 383 and 386 was perhaps the most turbulent of his life. For a short time he became involved in Academic philosophy. But it was Platonic philosophy that gave him a reference point that would last his whole life. As he toyed with secular philosophy, Augustine drifted into association with Ambrose, Bishop of Milan and into the company of other Christians. He began to read the Scriptures and in September of 386 he had his famous "conversion" experience.

From 386 to 396 Augustine developed as a Christian. He spent the first year after his conversion trying to answer philosophical questions in the light of the God he had come to know through the Church. In the winter of 386 Augustine became a formal candidate for baptism. He remained in Rome for a year and a half and in 388 returned to Africa.

Upon his return to his hometown, Tagaste, the prodigal son established a monastery. He lived there until 391. While Augustine was visiting the nearby town of Hippo the people requested that he be elevated to the priesthood, which he was. Until 396 he served as priest at Hippo. In 396 he was given the position of Bishop of Hippo, and retained that office until his death.

Augustine was alive during the capture of Rome by the Goths in 410. He lay on his deathbed while the Goths and Vandals lay siege to Hippo, dying on August 28, 430.

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene Portalie, *A Guide to the Thought of St. Augustine*. (Chicago: Henry Regency Company, 1960), 6.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 7, 8.

One of Augustine's correspondents, the bishop of Milevis, speaks of him as "God's truly busy bee, building up for us combs full of heavenly nectar."<sup>3</sup> There can be no doubt that Augustine was the greatest writer of the Catholic Church. He was not a systematic theologian nor the final word in Catholic theology. That task would be left to Thomas Aquinas. His writings are like Luther's. They are letters, sermons and essays written for specific people and in answer to specific questions.

In his writings Augustine ranges far and wide. His background affords him a base for discussing every conceivable topic. His writings have kept commentators and thinkers busy for centuries, and the interest in Augustine still goes on.

In general, his formal writings can be grouped in major categories and follow a certain chronological progression. Augustine's early writings were largely philosophical. If you are not prepared for them they will surprise you. There is very little of Christianity in them. In one of his most famous books, the *Soliloquies*, Augustine begins with a prayer to God asking God to help him in his quest for truth, and then engages in a strictly philosophical dialogue. To understand these early writings requires a certain understanding of Neo-Platonic philosophy and other philosophies of the day.

Other than his strictly philosophical writings, his essays are addressed to three main issues. First, he writes against the Manicheans, trying to influence some of his friends to leave the group and trying to keep others out of it.

Second, after Augustine became Bishop of Hippo he became more of an official spokesman for the church. In the years 400 - 412, one finds a number of writings against the Donatists. The Donatists were a rival church in North Africa. They had split away from the Catholic church over the question of whether or not wicked priests could hold office. In the anti-Donatist writings, Augustine sharpened his understanding of the Church.

Third, about 412 the Pelagian controversy broke out. Questions on free will, grace and predestination would largely occupy his time until the end of this life. These writings will be of most importance to us in this paper.

In addition to his formal writings, 270 letters and 363 sermons and various commentaries on some of the books of the Bible are extant. Of special significance are Augustine's Confessions. There he describes himself as the prodigal son, wandering from the faith and leaving home, but coming to his senses in a foreign country and finally returning home to his native Africa to serve the Lord. His greatest work is the City of God. It is an answer to the accusation that Rome was conquered by the barbarians because they had forsaken their gods. In the City of God Augustine puts the whole matter in perspective and traces how history is centered not on the city of man, but on God's city, his Church. His *On The Trinity* is a series of books on Scriptural and rational arguments for the Trinity. At the end of his life he wrote his Retractions in which he went over all his works and noted where he had erred.

Augustine was born at the end of the youth of the Church, and his thinking helped it move into maturity. He died when the Roman Empire was almost dead, and when the Church was to take the political and cultural reins. There was no one immediately after him who would refine and correct his writings. And even though the Church Councils would not accept all of his conclusions, his writings formed the basis of much of Catholic theology. Thomas Aquinas would replace him as the official spokesman for the church, but there would continue to be a strong Augustinian element in the Catholic Church.

Augustine is also a part of our heritage as confessional Lutherans. We may be surprised to see what a tremendous role he plays in our theological heritage. While reading Augustine one comes upon idea after idea that finds its way into Luther's writings. For example, the categories Luther uses in *The Bondage Of The Will* are all there in Augustine. Without taking away any of Luther's greatness, we will have to admit that Luther built on Augustine's foundation and brought it into line Scripturally. But the foundation was there, and Luther will be the first to admit his debt to Augustine.

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<sup>3</sup> Roy W. Battenhouse, "The Life of Augustine", *A Companion to the Study of Augustine*. (New York: Oxford, 1955) 54.

## Introduction to Grace

The question we will ask in this paper is: What is the relation between Augustine's understanding of grace and Luther's understanding of grace? Before we get into Augustine's teaching on grace, it would be good to get our bearings on how the Bible uses that term.

First, the standard definition of grace is good: "God's undeserved love." This definition could be broken down into various aspects of that love. Grace can refer to 1) God's favor toward us, 2) God's work of redeeming us through Jesus' sacrifice, 3) God's activity in leading us to faith (which includes electing, calling, and preserving us in faith, 4) God's power given to us as members of his church to do some facet of the work of his church (which includes our personal growth and ability to help others.) Each of these aspects finds its center in Christ.

In Romans 11:5 Paul writes about the favor of God, given to God's people from eternity, So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. He echoes this in 2 Timothy 1:9, who has saved us and called us to a holy life—not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time. In these two passages the meaning of grace is clearly God's favor since it speaks of something God did before we were ever born.

Other passages speak about God's grace in time. In 2 Corinthians 8:9 Paul calls Jesus' work for us a work of grace, For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich. In Ephesians 2:7 Paul refers to God's act of sending his Son as an act of grace, In order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus.

Jude 4 speaks about God's favor toward us and how godless men would slip into the church, who change the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord. In 2 Corinthians 6:1,2 Paul uses the term grace and then explains what it means, We urge you not to receive God's grace in vain. For he says, "In the time of my favor I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you." In both of these passages grace is the favor of God through which he forgives our sins and brings us to faith in his pardon.

There are passages in which grace refers to God's giving us some ability. Acts 6:8 tells us about Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power. In speaking about his own ministry, Paul writes in Romans 1:5, Through him and for his name's sake, we received grace and apostleship. He speaks about the gifts of grace that God gives to each Christian in Romans 12:6, We have different gifts, according to the grace given us.

Luther tells us that he understands God's grace as his favor in Christ. A couple quotations from *What Luther Says* will suffice. In 1527 Luther wrote, "I am seeking and thirsting for a gracious God. And He earnestly offers Himself as such and urges even those who spurn Him and are His enemies to accept Him as such."<sup>4</sup> In 1532 he wrote, "Paul teaches a difference between grace, on the one hand, and gifts, on the other. Grace signifies that favor with which God receives us, forgiving our sins and justifying us freely through Christ. Do not consider it a quality in man."<sup>5</sup> And in 1537 he said, "Grace consists in this, that God is merciful to us, shows Himself gracious for the sake of the Lord Christ, forgives all sins, and will not impute them unto us for eternal death. This is grace: the forgiveness of sins for the sake of the Lord Christ."<sup>6</sup> We should keep these words of Scripture and Luther in mind as we examine how Augustine understood God's grace.

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<sup>4</sup> Ewald Plass, *What Luther Says*, p. 603.

<sup>5</sup> Ewald Plass, *What Luther Says, Vol. II* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959), 603.

<sup>6</sup> Plass, *What Luther Says*, p. 603.

## Augustine and Grace: Introduction

In the next two parts of our paper we will explore how Augustine understood grace, or we might say, what he understood the Gospel to be. We will begin with his concept of the meaning of the word grace, listening to his own words as much as possible. Then we will attempt to see how his understanding of grace was the natural outflow of his experience. Third, we will examine his understanding of free will, that is, to what extent he held to the teaching of “by grace alone.” Finally, we will examine his concept of predestination.

## What Augustine Meant By Grace

The foundation of any faith is what its adherents understand by the word “grace.” Grace is what God gives us. How one understand grace determines what one considers his “good news,” his Gospel.

Throughout the history of the Church, there have been two lines of thinking on this issue. The first follows Scripture. Grace, according to Scripture, deals with God’s disposition, that is, his attitude toward us. It is God’s disposition of love and favor toward the world in general and particularly toward those who have come to faith in Jesus. The second line of thinking views grace as a quality that God gives the sinner to make him righteous. Sometimes this quality is called *gratia infusa*, although it might better be called by another term since *gratia infusa* can be understood correctly as gifts that the gracious God bestows on those who believe in his gracious disposition. The first understanding of grace finds its center in God’s favor in Christ. Here, God’s favor stands by itself; it is the center of our faith and our source of peace. All else flows from it. The second centers on a quality that enables us to obey the Laws of God, and it creates a Christianity that centers on the Law and how one is to find the grace needed to keep the Law.

There is a general consensus among Catholic and Lutherans alike that Augustine taught the second understanding of grace. This certainly does not imply that Augustine did not know God’s forgiveness. He did. He rejoiced in God’s forgiveness. But it was not a dominant theme in his writings. Even a cursory comparison of Augustine’s writings and Luther’s will bear this out. Chemnitz, who is otherwise very gracious toward Augustine, must confess,

The use of the word “grace” to describe the gifts of renewal is so common in Augustine and others that the grace of remission of sins or free acceptance by God is rarely mentioned in these discussions.... Indeed, there is no point in hiding the fact that Augustine in his conflict with the Pelagians used the word “grace” only in the sense of gifts.<sup>7</sup>

Pieper is clear on this also. He says,

Luther and Melanchthon were aware that the obscurities of Augustine on this point had to be cleared away. Augustine stressed not so much the gracious disposition of God in Christ as rather the renewal, which results solely from God’s grace, and this he made the ground of justification.<sup>8</sup>

What exactly did Augustine say? The following quotations were chosen because they are especially clear. However, I believe that any amount of reading of Augustine will show that these statements are the overriding norm rather than only one side of a more accurate understanding of grace.

Among the earliest of Augustine’s polemics are the treatises against the Manicheans. In *The Morals Of The Catholic Church* Augustine counters the charge of the Manicheans that they have the better road to morality. He writes, “Following after God is the de sire of happiness; to reach God is happiness itself.... The greatest commandment, therefore, which leads to a happy life, and the first, is this: ‘Thou shalt love the Lord

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<sup>7</sup> Martin Chemnitz, *Loci Theologici*, Vol. 2 p. 522.

<sup>8</sup> Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol 2 (St. Louis: Concordia, 1951), 15.

thy God with all thy heart, and soul, and mind.”<sup>9</sup> This is typical of Augustine, especially in his earlier years. As a philosopher, Augustine had been searching for two things: 1) the meaning of reality and 2) the best way to live so as to be happy. His early writings tell us that after he became a Christian he still pursued these goals but now within the context of Christianity. Christ, the Word, was the revealer of reality, and purification was the path to clearer revelation.

In another early treatise, *On The Profit Of Believing* (391 AD), Augustine explains what it means to be out from under the bondage of the Law. To Augustine, being free is not so much being forgiven by God, but receiving the grace needed to keep the Law. He writes that we are delivered from the threats of the Law, “from which, when the Grace of Christ sets us free, it condemns not that Law, but invites us at length to yield obedience to its love, not to be slaves to the fear of the Law.”<sup>10</sup> One can cite expressions like this from all over Augustine’s works. He speaks of grace, love and obedience stemming from love. It is easy to interpret his words in a Lutheran sense and “put the best construction” on them. However, when the reader searches the context, he finds no reference to forgiveness. Grace as the “medicine to overcome evil” is left standing by itself.

Throughout the Pelagian controversy Augustine was called upon to defend this point: God’s grace is not just the forgiveness of sin, as Pelagius taught, but is also needed to do anything good. While the nature of the controversy may have led Augustine to emphasize the grace that leads to morality since that was what Pelagius was denying, the only way a person can emphasize morality is by first of all interpreting grace as the good news of the forgiveness we have in Christ. Only then can it become the reason why we want to serve the Lord. But this Augustine did not do. He talked about grace during the Pelagian controversy in the same way as he talked about it beforehand.

Bear with me as I give a few longer quotations from one of Augustine’s earlier works against Pelagius (*On The Spirit And The Letter*, 412 AD). He explains what “the righteousness of God” is,

But I ask your attention, O man, to what follows. ‘But now the righteousness of God,’ says he, “without the law is manifested., Now those who wish to establish a righteousness of their own are ignorant of this righteousness; they will not submit themselves to it. His words are, “The righteousness of God is manifested He does not say, the righteousness of man, or the righteousness of his own will, but the ‘righteousness of God’—not that whereby he is Himself righteous, but that with which He endows man when He justifies the ungodly. The law, indeed, by issuing its commands and threats, and by justifying no man, sufficiently shows that it is by God’s gift, through the help of the Spirit, that a man is justified That righteousness of God, however, is without the law, which God by the Spirit of grace bestows on the believer without the help of the law. When indeed, He by the law discovers to a man his weakness, it is in order that by faith he may flee for refuge to His mercy, and be healed It is not, therefore, by the law, nor is it by their own will, that they are justified; but they are justified freely by his grace—not that it is wrought without our will; but our will is by the law shown to be weak, that grace may heal its infirmity; and that our healed will may fulfill the law.”<sup>11</sup>

As I read this you probably found yourself agreeing with much of it, but having an uneasy feeling that something was wrong. What is wrong is Augustine’s understanding of “the Law.” To us the Law means God’s will. To Augustine it means the pressure of God’s will without the ability to keep it. Augustine’s understanding of grace comes out clearly when he speaks about how a person is freed from the Law.

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<sup>9</sup> Whitney J. Oates, *Basic Writings of Saint Augustine* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992) 1: 328.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 1: 405.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 1: 471, 472.

The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life,” must be understood in the sense which we have already indicated—that the letter of the law, which teaches us not to commit sin, kills, if the life-giving spirit be absent, forasmuch as it causes sin to be known rather than avoided.<sup>12</sup>

For there is no doubt that, without His assisting grace, the law is “the letter which killeth”; but when the life-giving spirit is present, the law causes that to be loved as written within, which it once caused to be feared as written without.<sup>13</sup>

The law was therefore given, in order that grace might be sought; grace was given, in order that the law might be fulfilled. Now it was not through any fault of its own that the law was not fulfilled, but by the fault of the carnal mind; and this fault was to be demonstrated by the law, and healed by grace.<sup>14</sup>

Here, the phrase “the Spirit gives life” is understood in the sense that the Spirit gives us grace to keep the law.

Note the progression in the following beautifully written section and notice the role to which grace is assigned.

The law says: “Thou shalt not covet.” Faith says: “Heal my soul, for I have sinned against Thee.” Grace says: “Behold, thou are made whole: sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto thee.” Health says: “O Lord my God, I cried unto Thee, and Thou hast healed me.” Free will says: “I will freely sacrifice unto Thee.” Love of righteousness says: “Transgressors told me pleasant tales, but not according to Thy law, O Lord.”<sup>15</sup>

Here we can see clearly that grace is a power that heals one’s defective nature and makes it willing to serve God.

In a later treatise, *On Grace And Free Will* (426 AD), there is a good example of how Augustine interprets the teaching that we are not saved “by works of the Law.”

What is the purport of his saying, “Not of works, lest any man should boast,” while commending the grace of God? And then why does he afterwards, when giving a reason for using such words, say, “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works?” Why, therefore, does it run, “Not of works, lest any man should boast”? Now hear and understand. “Not of works’ is spoken of the works which you suppose have their origin in yourself alone; but you have to think of works for which God has molded you. For of these he says, “We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works.” Now he speaks ... in reference to one who was already in full manhood, “Create in me a clean heart, O God;’ concerning which also the apostle says, “Therefore, if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold all things are become new. And all things are of God.” We are framed, therefore, that is, formed and created, in the good works which’ we have not ourselves prepared, but “God hath before ordained that we should walk in them.’ It follows, then, dearly beloved, beyond all doubt, that as your good life is nothing else than God’s grace, so also the eternal life which is the recompense of a good life is the grace of God.<sup>16</sup>

“Of his fullness we have received, even grace for grace.” So that out of His fullness we have received, according to our humble measure, our *particles of ability* (emph. mine) as it were for leading good lives.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 1: 466.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 1: 486.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 1: 487.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 1: 503, 504.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 1: 749.

But over and above this, we shall also receive “‘grace for grace,’ when we shall have awarded to us eternal life, of which the apostle said: “The grace of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”<sup>17</sup>

In these two quotations we become uneasy as we hear Augustine saying that eternal life is a reward for good works, even though both of them come by grace.

In discussing the section in Romans 10 where Paul says that the Jews did not submit themselves to Christ’s righteousness, Augustine says,

For they [the Jews] were under the law, not under grace, and therefore sin had dominion over them, from which a man is not freed by the law, but by grace. On which account he elsewhere says, ‘For sin shall not have dominion over you; because ye are not under the law, but under grace.’ Not that the law is evil; but because they are under its power, whom it makes guilty by imposing commandments, not by aiding. It is by grace that any one is a doer of the law; and without this grace, he who is placed under the law will be only a hearer of the law. To such persons he addresses these words: “Ye who are justified by the law are fallen from grace.”<sup>18</sup>

Being free from the Law does not mean being free from its requirements, but having God’s gracious power enabling one to keep it. This sample of Augustine’s statements on grace should be enough to get us into the issue. Our next topic will be Augustine’s road to becoming a Christian.

### **Augustine’s “Conversion”**

The issue of grace is directly related to how Augustine views the experience he had by the fig tree. To understand the one is to understand the other. The story is told to us in detail in his *Confessions* to which we now turn.

Ever since he read Cicero’s *Hortensius* at age 19, Augustine devoted his life to a struggle to find “the good.” This was the goal of every philosopher. The road took him first into the Manichean church. Although Augustine remained in the Manichean church for 9 years, we should not underestimate the fact that Augustine was brought up in the Catholic church. His mother may not have been able to give him the religious instruction she wanted to, but Augustine was part of a household where he imbibed Catholic religion and practice until he reached the age when he began to wander. In his *Confessions* he states that during his entire search for wisdom was always a basic concern fostered at his mother’s breast which

“alone checked me thus ardent, that the name of Christ was not in it [i.e. in the philosophies he studied]. For this name, according to Thy mercy, O Lord, this name of my Savior, Thy Son, had my tender heart piously drunk ... and whatsoever was without that name, though ever so erudite, polished and truthful, took not complete hold on me.”<sup>19</sup>

The Manicheans were appealing to Augustine. They taught a duality of nature where good and bad substances were mingled in the body and its adherents did not have to worry about the bad in their lives since it was part of their very substance. Augustine could comfortably say, “My substance made me do it.”

But after a time he became disillusioned with Manicheism. The break took place when he learned from Neo-Platonism that there were not two opposing substances, but one God. This made more sense to Augustine since it was more in line with God’s omnipotence. To NeoPlatonists, evil was a lack of “closeness” to God, but in itself it had no substance. Following Plato, Augustine began to believe that God had illumined each individual, giving the individual an inner path on which to walk and become closer to himself. The more a

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 1: 753.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 1: 32

person came to “know himself” the more he came to know the light that was within him and the more he could draw closer to God.

How to do this was the question. The answers given by the Neo-Platonists always centered on some sort of purification. Only as a person cleansed himself from “false goods” (i.e. all the things the flesh considers good but are not) can he approach the “real good” which is God.

At this point, as we mentioned above, Augustine became familiar with some Christians in Milan. Neo-Platonism would be for him only a stepping stone into the Catholic Church for since these “philosophers were without the saving name of Christ, I utterly refused to commit the cure of my fainting soul [to them].”<sup>20</sup> His tremendous desire to find the source of truth would end when he “resolved, therefore, to be a catechumen in the Catholic Church.”<sup>21</sup> At this time he confesses that his faith in the Catholic Church was a faith, as yet “unformed upon many points.”<sup>22</sup> It was an intellectual assent, or faith in this fact: The road to God could be found within the Catholic Church. “I had now begun to believe that Thou wouldest by no means have given such excellency of authority to those Scriptures throughout all lands, had it not been Thy will thereby to be believed in, and thereby sought.”<sup>23</sup>

Although we are tempted to focus on his later “conversion experience,” Augustine’s earlier “coming to faith” was just as important. This was his intellectual conversion. Now his quest for the source of truth was over. As unformed as his faith was, he was convinced that the Catholic Church held the answers to his quest.

But there was another problem that needed addressing. His intellect had been converted, but not his will. Neo-Platonism had given him the concept of God as a spiritual substance who could be found, but it led him to depended on knowledge to free the will so it could find him. Augustine knew better. He knew that he had always known what was the right thing to do, but he could never seem to get the power to do what he wanted to do. And now, in the Catholic Church he saw people who seemed to have the power to serve God. Augustine knew his mind had been freed but not his will.

Augustine had a keen awareness of his sin. He was a man of passion in every sense. The sins that concerned him were 1) the love of women. He had had a mistress since 19. Two years earlier, his mother had arranged to have him marry an “honorable” girl. For this reason he separated from his mistress, but because the girl he was betrothed to was too young, Augustine had to wait two years. During that wait he could not go without, so he took another mistress with whom he was living during these struggles. 2) He was caught up in pride. He had become quite well known, and loved nothing more than the praise of the crowd.

The intense longing to have a will that would be able to rise up to God was his lot during the days prior to the day of his experience. Looking back on this time of struggle he saw God’s ways.

But you, Lord, abide forever, and you are not angry with us forever because you have pity on our dust and ashes, and it was pleasing in your sight to reform my deformity. Inside me your good was working on me to make me restless until you should become clear and certain to my inward sight. Through the hidden hand of your healing art my swelling abated and from day to day the troubled and clouded sight of my mind grew better through the stinging ointment of healthy sorrow.<sup>24</sup>

Following a somewhat Platonic mindset he wrote,

I was admonished by all this to return to my own self, and, with you to guide me, I entered into the innermost pan of myself, and I was able to do this because you were my helper. I entered and I saw with

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 1: 72.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 1: 96.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 1: 78.

<sup>24</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Rex Warner, (New York: New American Library, 1963), p.147.



my soul's eye (such as I it was) an unchangeable light shining above this eye of my soul and above my mind.<sup>25</sup>

You beat back the weakness of my sight, blazing upon me with your rays, and I trembled in love and in dread, and I found that I was far distant from you, in a region of total unlikeness, as if I were hearing your voice from on high saying: "I am the food of grown men. Grow and you shall feed upon me. And you will not, as with the food of the body, change me into yourself, but you will be changed into me."<sup>26</sup>

The next lengthy quotations confront us with some very important material. Remember, Augustine is now describing the period between his intellectual acceptance of Scripture, and his submitting his life to God's will in all respects. He speaks about his life at this time in the context of Romans 7.

I had no answer to make to you when you called me: "Awake, thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light, I could still find nothing at all to say except lazy words spoken half asleep: "A minute," "just a minute," "just a little time longer." But there was no limit to the minutes, and the little time longer went a long way. I was in vain that "I delighted in Thy law according to the inner man, when another law in my members rebelled against the law of my mind, and led me captive under the law of sin which was in my members."<sup>27</sup>

This [to imitate the example of a conversion he had heard about] was just what I longed for myself, but I was held back, and I was held back not by fetters put on me by someone else, but by the iron bondage of my own will. The enemy held my will and made a chain out of it and bound me with it. From a perverse will came lust, and slavery to lust became a habit, and the habit, being constantly yielded to, became a necessity. These were like links, hanging each to each (which is why I called it a chain), and they held me fast in a hard slavery. And the new will which I was beginning to have and which urged me to worship you in freedom and to enjoy you, God, the only certain joy, was not yet strong enough to overpower the old will which by its oldness had grown hard in me. So my two wills, one old, one new, one carnal, one spiritual, were in conflict, and they wasted my soul by their discord.<sup>28</sup>

We conclude with a series of quotations leading up to his "conversion" experience.

As to me I was mad and dying; but there was sanity in my madness, life in my death; I knew how evil I was; I did not know how well I would be soon.... My spirit was in a turmoil; I was boiling with indignation against myself for not entering into your will and covenant, my God, where all my bones cried out that I should enter and praise you to the skies.... All I had to do was to will to go there, and I would not only go but would immediately arrive; but it was necessary for the will to be resolute and sincere, not the turning and twisting this way and that of a will that was half maimed, struggling, with one part rising and another part falling.<sup>29</sup>

I was saying inside myself: 'Now, now, let it be now!', and as I spoke the words I was already beginning to go in the direction I wanted to go. I nearly managed it, but I did not quite manage it. Yet I did not slip right back to the beginning; I was a stage above that, and I stood there to regain my breath. And I tried again and I was very nearly there; I was almost touching it and grasping it, and then I was not there, I

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 149.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 149-150.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p. 169.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p. 168.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p. 175.

was not touching it, I was not grasping it. I hesitated to die to death and to live to life; inveterate evil had more power over me than the novelty of good.... Toys and trifles, utter vanities had been my mistresses, and now they were holding me back, pulling me by the garment of my flesh and softly murmuring in my ear: "Are you getting rid of us?" and "From this moment shall we never be with you again for all eternity?"<sup>30</sup>

Yet still they did hold me back as I hesitated to tear myself away and to shake them off and to take the great step in the direction where I was called. Violence of habit spoke the words: "Do you think that you can live without them?" But by now it spoke very faintly. In the direction toward which I had turned my face and still trembled to take the last step, I could see the chaste dignity of Continnence; she was calm and serene, cheerful without wantonness... stretching out to receive and to embrace me with those holy hands of hers. She smiled at me and there was encouragement in her smile, as though she were saying: "Can you not do what these men and these women have done? ... Why do you try and stand by yourself, and so not stand at all? Let him support you. Do not be afraid. He will not draw away and let you fall. Put yourself fearlessly in his hands. He will receive you and will make you well."<sup>31</sup>

And now from my hidden depths my searching thought had dragged up and set before the sight of my heart the whole mass of my misery. Then a huge storm rose up within me bringing with it a huge downpour of tears. So that I might pour out all these tears and speak the words that came with them I rose up from Alypius (solitude seemed better for the business of weeping) and went further away so that I might not be embarrassed even by his presence. This was how I felt and he realized it. No doubt I had said something or other, and he could feel the weight of my tears in the sound of my voice. And so I rose to my feet, and he, in a state of utter amazement, remained in the place where we had been sitting. I flung myself down on the ground somehow under a fig tree and gave free reign to my tears; they streamed and flooded from my eyes, an 'acceptable sacrifice to Thee.' And I kept saying to you, not perhaps in these words, but with this sense: "And Thou, O Lord, how long? How long, Lord; will Thou be angry forever? Remember not our former iniquities! For I felt that it was these which were holding me fast. And in my misery I would exclaim: "How long, how long this 'tomorrow and tomorrow'? Why not now? Why not finish this very hour with my uncleanness?"

So I spoke, weeping in the bitter contrition of my heart. Suddenly a voice reaches my ears from a nearby house. It is the voice of a boy or a girl (I don't know which) and in a kind of singsong the words are constantly repeated: "Take it and read it. Take it and read it! At once my face changed, and I began to think carefully of whether the singing of words like these came into any kind of game which children play, and I could not remember that I had ever heard anything like it before. I checked the force of my tears and rose to my feet, being quite certain that I must interpret this as a divine command to me to open the book and read the first passage which I should come upon. For I had heard this about Anthony: he had happened to come in when the Gospel was being read, and as though the words read were spoken directly to himself, had received the admonition: "Go, sell all that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven, and come and follow me." And by such an oracle he had been immediately converted to you.

So I went eagerly back to the place where Alypius was sitting, since it was there that I had left the book of the Apostle when I rose to my feet. I snatched up the book, opened it, and read in silence the passage upon which my eyes first fell: 'Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and wantonness, not in strife and envying; but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh in

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, p. 180.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p. 180-181.

concupiscence.” I had no wish to read further; there was no need to. For immediately when I had reached the end of this sentence it was as though my heart was filled with a light of confidence and all the shadows of my doubt were swept away.... For you converted me to you in such a way that I no longer sought a wife nor any other worldly hope.<sup>32</sup>

Augustine gives thanks to God for this conversion.

O Lord, I am Thy servant; I am Thy servant and the son of Thy handmaid; Thou hast broken my bonds in sunder. But where had this ability been for all those years? And from what profound and secret depth was my free will suddenly called forth in a moment so that I could bow my neck to your easy yoke and my shoulders to your light burden, O Christ Jesus, my Helper and my Redeemer? How sweet it suddenly became to me to be without the sweetness of those empty toys! ... For you cast them out from me, you cast them out and you entered into me to take their place, sweeter than all pleasure.<sup>33</sup>

Augustine was a brilliant man. What makes this account so compelling is that Augustine possessed a mixture of qualities that allowed him to analyze and explain himself in a way that goes beyond the skill of most. He was a philosopher, yet not a searcher of abstract concepts. He was searching for the intellectual and moral power, that is, the liberty to know God and draw closer to him.

What draws us toward Augustine is his frankness, his insight, and his skill with words. But it is more. His searchings, his recognition of God’s providence, his struggle to be moral are all part of the human experience. Augustine would acknowledge that not all were as consumed as he was, but all carry within themselves the seeds of his experience.

What was his conversion? If we are squeamish about talking about people’s conversions, we will never understand Augustine. Nor will we truly understand the nature of our own ministry, for we deal on a daily basis with what Augustine so brilliantly describes. The analysis that follows is my own, drawn from my experience with people from other churches. You will have to think about it yourselves, but I believe it fits the facts and helps explain much of what we witness in the religious world around us.

The context of Augustine’s experience is of utmost importance. The setting that his upbringing, his church, and his world gave to him, coupled with his own spiritual makeup come together to create a context that I believe led to his conversion. Think through the experience and what led up to it. First, Augustine was not an unbeliever. He was the child of Catholic parents and the child of the Catholic Church. Even during his period of wandering he still remembered the name of Jesus, and the fact of God’s judgment. His conscience would not let that go. As a child of the Catholic Church of his day he inherited a flawed view of forgiveness. One example of this is his understanding of Baptism that according to church teaching was a “one time” sacrament that remits past sins (instead of an act that joins us with Christ thus giving us continued forgiveness.) Shortly after his conversion he had a severe toothache that caused him such pain that he began to be afraid of God. He was miraculously healed and thanked the Lord for his faith that “suffered me not to be at rest in regard to my past sins, which were not yet forgiven me by Thy baptism.”<sup>34</sup>

Augustine is a child of the church also in the sense of being part of the more general spiritual climate. While Augustine would become the defender of grace, it was grace whose goal was consistent with the predominate moralistic goals of the church of his time. This is best illustrated by his intense desire for chastity.

As we have seen, Augustine’s search ended with an experience that gives his will the liberty to do what it wanted to do, i.e. live morally. It is my contention that in such a climate where appreciation for Christ’s forgiveness is lacking, and pressure is put on the individual to arrive at some moral or experiential goal—a conversion experience such as Augustine’s will eventually take place.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p. 182-183.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p. 184.

<sup>34</sup> Oates, *Basic Writings* 1: 134.

That Augustine came to a genuine faith in Christ as his Savior is beyond doubt. He knew and treasured Christ's forgiveness. But from the way Augustine described his conversion experience, I think we would do well to question whether this was when he came to faith in the real sense of the term.

His experience fits exactly the pattern of conversion experiences of those who throughout the centuries have been associated with groups that lack a clear understanding of the Gospel, yet whose experience convinces them beyond a doubt that they have found Christianity. The setting in which Augustine found himself as described above, is a setting that has repeated itself over and over again throughout the history of the church. A weak understanding of forgiveness coupled with a strong moralistic religious bent; a person caught up in sinful habits that plague him and that he wants to shed; a deep yearning to be cured; all of these leading to an experience of euphoria and sudden success against the sins of the will—is a common experience. Whether we are talking about Saint Augustine, Medieval mystics, followers of Osiander, the Pietistic Movement in Europe, the Great Awakenings in our country, or the modern Evangelical Movement, they all have these elements in common.

All of this is in contrast to a Lutheran understanding of the nature of Christianity where forgiveness is central. It is in contrast to a conversion where a person accepts the good news that Christ has died for his sins. The matter has nothing to do with the intensity of the struggle prior to conversion, nor really with the person's presuppositions prior to conversion. What it has to do with is what gives relief to the person converted. Is it the knowledge of God's gracious forgiveness, or is it a quality infused into the recipient? I believe the former to be Christian conversion, the latter to be the reception of a human or in some cases a supernatural spirit, a spirit that simply replaces one sin with another.

Whether you accept this interpretation of Augustine's experience or not, as we look at Augustine's experience we cannot help but think about Augustine's definition of grace. What Augustine received through his experience was power to rise above his sins. And this is exactly what he described grace to be throughout his entire life. The nature of Augustine's experience, I believe, led him to retain a certain emphasis on the natural "seeking heart," which he never completely resolved. It determined his understanding of faith, which influenced his understanding of "by grace alone" as we will see in the next part.

### **Part 3: Augustine on "By Grace Alone" And Predestination**

#### **Augustine's Struggle with "By Grace Alone"**

Augustine's Christianity and his approach to Scripture, can only be understood in the light of the events he describes in the sections from his Confessions quoted above. His intellectual conversion to the truth of Catholicism, and the conversion of his heart to an unfettered life, are the keys to his theology. In commenting on Augustine's views on faith and reason Gilson writes that "the decisive reason for Augustine [ 's views] will always be his personal experience, the keen recollection of his own ambitions and of their disappointment."<sup>35</sup> (This is true both for his intellectual and moral conversion.

What did Augustine teach about "grace alone?" In his early life Augustine taught that we must give credit to God for all we do as God's people, but that man has the power to come to a decision of faith. Later on the Semi-Pelagians would hold up his earlier statements and claim that his view and theirs were the same. He admits his early errors and chides them for not advancing to a proper understanding along with him.

Augustine grew to understand "by grace alone" during the Pelagian controversy. His teaching is so clear that Chemnitz, both in his *Examination of the Council of Trent*, and in his *Loci Theologici* uses Augustine against the Catholic Church on behalf of "grace alone."<sup>36</sup> For example, Chemnitz quotes Augustine, "Free will

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<sup>35</sup> Etienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Augustine* (New York: Random House, 1960), p. 31.

<sup>36</sup> Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, trans. Fred Kramer (St. Louis: Concordia, 1971) and *Loci Theologici*, trans. J. Preus (St. Louis: Concordia, 1989). See Loci on Free Will.

is captive and is good for nothing except to sin.”<sup>37</sup> Chemnitz liberally quotes Augustine throughout the appropriate loci.

All this would be well and good, except for a major wrinkle. The major wrinkle is Augustine’s insistence on using the phrase, “the freedom of the will,” and the frequency with which he uses it. He is clear on the fact that we are saved by grace alone, but he is equally insistent that we have a free will. He uses the term so often that it sticks out and grates on Lutheran ears. He says the same as Luther about the bondage of the will, but always calls it free will.

Chemnitz explains Augustine’s way of speaking as stemming from the fact that Augustine wants man to be fully accountable to God, which he can be only if his will is free. Also, it stems from the very definition of the nature of the will: to “freely will.”<sup>38</sup>

Both of these emphases are correctives to Manichean errors. However, I think that there is more to it than this. I think the answer to Augustine’s use of the term “free will” is part of the overall picture we are drawing of Augustine’s understanding of grace. Chemnitz, following Luther’s use of Augustine, almost equates Augustine’s position with Luther’s. On the other hand, the great Catholic Augustine scholar, Etienne Gilson, views Augustine more as a philosopher who has found the answer to his natural yearnings. He writes,

His doctrine has one element of unwavering constancy due to the fact that he had refuted Pelagius even before knowing him. The point which dominates the whole history of the controversy is that Pelagianism was a radical negation of Augustine’s own personal experience, or, if we prefer, Augustine’s personal experience was in its essence and even in its most intimate details the very negation of Pelagianism.... To what conclusion did Augustine’s own experience lead him? It led to this, that for many long years he had known the law without being able to carry it out. And not only did he know the law; before his very eyes he saw it carried out by others and although he longed with his whole soul to imitate them, he had to admit that he was unable to do so.... Since the will desires the good, it is by nature destined to accomplish it; since it is still unable to carry out the good it desires, there is something damaged within it. Let us call the cause of that damage “sin,” and let us prescribe its remedy, namely, man’s redemption by God, along with the grace of Jesus Christ, which flows from it. Once this is done, the economy of the moral life, impenetrable to the philosophers, becomes transparently clear because this is the only doctrine which takes into account all the facts, and especially the following: as long as a will relies on itself to do good, it remains powerless. The solution to the enigma is that there is a supernatural, divine assistance through which the law becomes something realizable for the human will, and failure to recognize the necessity of this assistance is the very essence of Pelagianism.<sup>39</sup>

I think Chemnitz may be looking at Augustine through Lutheran glasses. And I think Gilson may be looking at the mature Augustine through Catholic glasses. I think the answer lies somewhere between the two, or perhaps includes elements of both.

What does Augustine say? Where does he locate the boundary line between the natural human will and will shaped by God’s grace?

Early on, Augustine claimed that man had a free will to believe. In a statement written at the end of his life he says, “In the solution of this question I labored indeed on behalf of the free choice of the human will, but God’s grace overcame.”<sup>40</sup> Later, in his 412 treatise, *On the Spirit and the Letter*, he set up a sort of mediating position. He states that even if man is naturally free to believe, it is still an act of God’s grace. He writes,

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<sup>37</sup> Chemnitz, *Examination* p. 417.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, p. 413ff.

<sup>39</sup> Gilson, *The Philosophy of St. Augustine*, p. 159.

<sup>40</sup> Oates, *Basic Writings* 1: 784.

If we believe that we may attain this grace (and of course believe voluntarily) then the question arises, whence we have this will?—if from nature, why is it not at everybody’s command, since the same God made all men? If from God’s gift, then again, why is not the gift open to all, since “He will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth?” Let us then, first of all, lay down this proposition, and see whether it satisfies the question before us: that free will, naturally assigned by the Creator to our rational soul, is such a neutral power, as can either incline towards faith, or turn toward unbelief. Consequently a man cannot be said to have even that will with which he believes in God, without having received it, since this rises at the call of God out of the free will which he received naturally when he was created.<sup>41</sup>

The two leading Catholic authorities I read, Portalie and Gilson gravitate toward establishing Augustine’s mature position in the light of the above quotation. Here they correctly find Augustine giving a place to human reason and human self determination prior to a person’s conversion. They state that in his concept of grace, Augustine includes the abilities God graciously allows man’s nature to keep after the fall. But in so doing they don’t do justice to his later statements. Chemnitz, on the other hand, focuses on Augustine’s more mature statements that exclude these human elements altogether. But does Chemnitz give proper weight to Augustine’s dogged use of the term “freedom of the will.”

My conclusion is that Augustine’s own experience makes it impossible for him to construct a fully cogent theology of the will. When we are dealing with “infused grace” the issue is much more complicated than it is when grace begins with the “favor of God” and when “by grace alone” is thought of as leading a person to faith in “the favor of God.” Specifically, Augustine had thirteen years of wanting—wanting to know God and wanting to be moral—as the background for his understanding of the will. How should he interpret the action of his soul during that time? He willed something and ultimately his conversion gave him what he willed. Was that will bad? How should he interpret the fact that he was led to understand the nature of God through Neo-Platonism. The rational arguments for God’s existence, and the immortality of the soul were important to him. Were those arguments valid? Most important, did those arguments lead him in the direction of the true God and then play a role in his finding him? If so, in what sense did they do this? His experience would suggest a free will that could to some degree prepare a person for grace.

On the other hand he had experienced how God’s grace, as he understood it, had come to him. It was something he didn’t anticipate or expect. It was a free gift. It had simply flooded over him. Could he claim any merit for his receiving it? He would answer, No. Chemnitz is right in quoting Augustine in the sense that later in his life Augustine gave all credit to God’s grace. Beyond doubt, Augustine believed that a person can do nothing without God’s grace.

But there is still an underlying problem. The problem is that we are dealing with a different understanding of grace: the power for moral living. This understanding of grace makes it easy for a person to drift into the idea that man contributes something toward his salvation. The experience of the natural desire to want morality may be explained as the remnant of a natural light in the human soul left there (by God’s grace-Augustine’s mediating position) after the Fall into sin. Augustine would deny this later in his life. But the very nature of his experience did not allow him to use the right terminology to reject it. The predominance of the freedom of his will that yearned for so many years to have liberty or power to do what it wanted was too great to overcome.

Later generations found it too easy to exploit Augustine’s concept of free will. The temptation was there to use Augustine’s term, water it down, and through it to drift into Semi-Pelagianism with Augustine’s stamp of approval. Catholicism would do just that. It would pick up on that term, strip it of its austere Augustinian meaning, and connect it with man’s natural desire for morality. The boundary line between what man did prior to grace and what he could do only under grace would be ill defined and it continues to be a source of difficulty for Catholics even today.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 1: 509.

Augustine was not guilty of poorly defining “by grace alone,” but he was guilty of establishing the “infused grace” model of conversion, where conversion is a human spiritual response to the pull of the natural “*opinio legis*,” where man desires morality outside the context of Christ’s forgiveness. Augustine was guilty of codifying an entire system of Christianity where the limits of man’s will and God’s grace could not be clearly defined since the nature of Christianity for Augustine was weighted heavily in the direction of an answer to this natural desire.

I believe that Augustine taught “by grace alone” but I believe in so doing he was not totally consistent with his own conversion experience. His teaching did not flow naturally from his pen, and was forced out of him by the Pelagian controversy. Luther speaks like this. When commenting on how the fathers said little on the Christian’s struggle against his flesh, he writes “If it had not been necessary for Augustine to have so many controversies with the Pelagians, he, too, would have had little understanding of it.”<sup>42</sup> And in 1538 Luther is reputed to have said, “Augustine writes nothing especially good concerning faith except when he fights against the Pelagians. They awakened him and made a man out of him.”<sup>43</sup>

### **Augustine and Predestination**

Perhaps this will become clearer when we consider what Augustine taught about predestination. He addresses this issue in one of his last treatises, *Predestination of the Saints*, written in 428 or 429. (Notice how much Luther sounds like him.) The capacity to have faith, as the capacity to have love, belongs to men’s nature; but to have faith, even as to have love, belongs to the grace of believers.<sup>44</sup>

In the elect, the will is prepared by the Lord.<sup>45</sup>

Therefore the election obtained what it obtained gratuitously; there preceded none of those things which they might first give, and it should be given to them again. He did not save them because of anything they did. But to the rest who were blinded, as is there plainly declared, it was done in recompense.<sup>46</sup>

Let us, then, understand the calling whereby they become elected-not those who are elected because they have believed, but who are elected that they may believe.<sup>47</sup>

Between grace and predestination there is only this difference, that predestination is the preparation for grace, while grace is the donation itself. When, therefore, the apostle says, Not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus in good works,” it is grace; but what follows—“which God hath prepared that we should walk in them”—is predestination.<sup>48</sup>

Faith then, as well in its beginning as in its completion, is God’s gift; and let no one have any doubt whatever, unless he desires to resist the plainest sacred writings, that this gift is given to some, while to some it is not given. But why it is not given to all ought not to disturb the believer, who believes that from one all have gone into a condemnation, which undoubtedly is most righteous; so that even if none were delivered therefrom, there would be no just cause for finding fault with God. Whence it is plain that it is a great grace for many to be delivered, and to acknowledge in those that are not delivered what would be due to themselves; so that he that glorieth may glory not in his own merits, which he sees to be equalled in those that are condemned, but in the Lord. But why He delivers one rather than another—“His

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<sup>42</sup> LW 30, 69 – *Commentary on 1 Peter*, 1522

<sup>43</sup> LW 28, 309 – *Lectures on 1 Timothy*, 1527-1528.

<sup>44</sup> Oates, *Basic Writings* 1: 787.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 1: 788.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 1: 809.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 1: 795.

judgments are unsearchable, and His ways past finding out.” For it is better in this case for us to hear or to say, O man, who art thou that repliest against God?” than to dare to speak as if we could know what He has chosen to be kept secret.<sup>49</sup>

Augustine teaches predestination in a way consistent with his teaching on grace. Augustine makes some distinctions that we are used to, for example, that we are saved by grace alone, and if we are condemned it is because of our own guilt. But here too, Augustine’s understanding of grace plays havoc with his exegesis and teaching. Why? Consider again Augustine’s experience. He wanted the power to become something and that power was given to him. How was it given? It was given through a direct impartation from God. The Spirit of grace simply came to him from above. Augustine’s conversion came when he was reading the Word. But the word he read was law. “Don’t conform to the world. Put on the Lord Jesus Christ.” He had wanted to do this before but had been unable. Now he was enabled to do it. Why then? Why not before? Why not after? Augustine does not know. He only knows God gave him this gift at this time in his life. And this he calls his conversion. The burning question then is: “How can people be sure that God wants to impart this gracious power to them?”

Here is where Augustine, in conformity with his understanding of grace, departs from Luther in how he views predestination. On the surface, as we have seen, Augustine makes some very Scriptural statements about predestination according to God’s grace. However, because of how he understands grace, Augustine’s description of the nature of God’s predestination cannot help but take what is hidden and try and explain it. His teaching becomes cold and can only create doubt. In the later work, *On the Predestination Of The Saints*, he says,

God indeed calls many predestinated children of His, not with that calling with which they were called who would not come to the marriage, since with that calling were called also the Jews, to whom Christ crucified is an offence, and the Gentiles, to whom Christ crucified is foolishness; but with that calling He calls the predestinated which the apostle distinguished when he said that he preached Christ, the wisdom of God and the power of God, to them that were called, Jews as well as Greeks. For thus he says, ‘But unto them which are called, in order to show that there were some who were not called; knowing that there is a certain sure calling of those who are called according to God’s purpose.’<sup>50</sup>

As we see, Augustine resorts to the answer of effective and non-effective calling.

The reason he does this is linked with his view of the nature of grace. Portalie gives a good explanation of Augustine’s perception of election. Notice how Portalie’s entire discussion revolves around “graces” or specific events in one’s life that trigger a response. He asks the question, “How does the power to resist grace fit in with the absolute certitude of the result?” He gives Augustine’s answer,

There are many ways to invite a person to the faith. Since souls are differently disposed, God knows which invitation will be received favorably and which will not be so received by each person. Only they are the elect for whom God chooses an efficacious invitation, although God could convert all.

Before any divine decree to create the world the infinite knowledge of God presents to Him all the graces and different series of graces which he can prepare for each soul, along with the consent or refusal which would follow in each circumstance-and that in millions and millions of possible combinations. Thus he sees that St. Peter, if he had received a different grace, would not have been

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid, 1: 792, 793.

<sup>50</sup> Oates, *Basic Writings* 1: 806.



converted and Judas, if a different divine call had sounded in his heart, would have done penance and been saved.<sup>51</sup>

In other words, God could have prepared any set of circumstances ranging from a world in which all were saved, to a world in which no one was saved. But in his wisdom he chose to create this present world with its number of elect.

In teaching predestination, on the surface Augustine may say the same thing as Luther. However, where grace is a quality that God bestows on people predestination becomes God's setting up a series of events to which he knows the elect will respond. If the series of events were different, the outcome would be different. It is almost an "every man has his price" approach. If God ups the stakes sufficiently all people would respond to him eventually. In the case of the lost, why God does not reach their breaking point belongs to the mystery of his will. The grace he gave them, however, was real, and their refusal to accept it makes them guilty.

### **Conclusion**

Hence we see that Augustine used many of the same expressions as Luther. We are saved by grace through faith. Human will can perform nothing without God's grace. Our faith is a gift of God. Our good works are a product of God's grace in our hearts. God predestines his own to salvation and those who are lost, however, must bear the blame themselves. The categories that Luther raised and the expressions he used are all there in Augustine. However, there is one thing missing in Augustine: a proper understanding of the meaning of grace.

Recall what we said about the difference between conversions similar to Augustine, and the conversion of a person to the hope of God's forgiveness. The latter convert focuses on God's grace as forgiveness and will not have difficulty realizing that his human will made no provision for his coming to faith. For him, predestination will keep its completely paradoxical nature. For him, grace is never replaced by graces. Grace is never viewed as the series of influences through which God has drawn him to give himself morally to him, but is solely dependent on the single grace God reveals in his Word: that the Lamb of God has taken away the sin of the world.

The other conversion, that is, the one Augustine experienced (where grace is the power to keep the law), cannot maintain a consistent view of "by grace alone" since experience knows that the origins of this grace (the yearning and desire for it) are indeed to be found in the human will. Nor can it resist probing into the paradox of grace. In that system, predestination will find a few champions like Augustine and Calvin who focus on how the impartation of grace was completely beyond their control, but for the most part it will be lost to some brand of decision theology. Augustine helps us answer the puzzling question of why a single church group like the Catholics or the Reformed can waver between the contradictory positions of absolute predestination and decision theology: a misunderstanding of the nature of God's grace.

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<sup>51</sup> Eugene Portalie, *A Guide to the Thought of St. Augustine* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1960), p. 201.

## Part 4: Luther and Augustine

### Luther the Augustinian

For some, the Augustinian order may have been merely a brand of monastery, but for Luther it was clearly more. He read Augustine and took him seriously.

As a Catholic, Luther had inherited all the accretions of the past hundreds of years that lay on his soul like a ton of bricks. He could not escape from the burden of trying to live a good life and finding himself unable to do so. In a sense, he was in Augustine's shoes prior to his "conversion." But there was a difference in how Luther and Augustine resolved their conflict.

I believe that sometimes we are a little too simplistic in our explanation of how Luther's mind and faith developed. I admit guilt here. We paint him as a man trapped by his guilt and show how the wretched Catholics just laid one burden after another on him. Then, by God's grace, he came to understand the Gospel in all its fullness and that the righteousness of Romans 1: 17 is the imputed righteousness God gave him as a gift. Suddenly all was clear to Luther, the 95 Thesis were written and the Reformation began.

There is a thought-provoking book by Lowell Green, a teacher at Concordia College, River Forest at the time the book was written. In *How Melancthon Helped Luther Discover The Gospel*, (a misnomer since there is very little on Melancthon in the book), Green traces Luther's early development from roughly 1512 through 1518.

In the first half of his book Green describes the crucial years in which Luther was moving toward his Reformation position. Of importance to us is that Luther at that time was a young follower of Augustine.

The transition that led Luther to his mature view was not a mere jump from salvation by works to salvation by faith in Christ's forgiveness. Rather, it began with a long movement away from the legalistic, man centered religion of Catholicism into what we might call the pseudo-evangelical world of Augustine. After 1509 and especially in the years 1512 and 1513 Luther seems to have devoured Augustine. In his early lectures he is well acquainted with him. Green speaks about a crucial awakening in 1512 or 1513 where Luther came to see the Augustinian distinction between the works of the law (*opera legis*) and the works of faith (*opera fidei*). He came to see that good works were not something he had to produce for God, but that God's grace would produce those works in him. Green writes that "around 1513 Luther probably had a preliminary breakthrough in which he discovered that the righteousness of God is not merely punitive but also redemptive."<sup>52</sup> However, "this was not the definitive discovery of the evangelical concept. Rather, it was the recovery of insights taught by Augustine."<sup>53</sup> During the next five years, Luther would develop his views of justification "in full accord with the Catholic teaching of the past."<sup>54</sup> In the 1515-1516 *Lectures On Romans* Luther taught that justification come not by the works of the law but by the works of faith "worked by the infused grace of God by the Holy Ghost."<sup>55</sup>

In a study of Luther's great works between 1515 and 1518, Green summarizes Luther's understanding of grace during this period. Grace is 1) "the preparation for the production of righteousness in the believer." It is that which 2) "brings the sinner forgiveness for the sake of Christ." Green says,

Here Luther at times comes close to the mature Reformational view of grace as divine goodness. Nevertheless he fails to overcome his earlier understanding Grace is not yet unequivocally the attitude of God toward sinners but is still a substance which does something. *Grace brings release from guilt after it has removed the sin and covered the offense.*<sup>56</sup> (emph. mine)

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<sup>52</sup> Lowell Green, *How Melancthon Helped Luther Discover the Gospel* (Fallbrook, California: Verdict Publications, 1980), 61.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, p. 61.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, p. 69.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, p. 64.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, p. 157.

3) Luther “thinks of grace as medicine In continuity with medieval theology, the early Luther thought of grace as the medicine which Christ the Physician used to heal the sin afflicted patient,”<sup>57</sup> 4) “This new habitus brings the believer to the performance of good works. Justification is God’s pronouncement that the sinner is righteous. First, he is made righteous through justification, and then he does righteous deeds.”<sup>58</sup> This may sound close to the later Reformer, but Green comments,

At this period Luther was still bound by the older view, in which faith was intellectual while hope involved trust and confidence in one’s salvation. It therefore becomes clear that Luther was here thinking that the man who enjoyed the *habitus* evoked by grace was the one fully justified before God.<sup>59</sup>

It should become clear to us by now that whenever justification is considered to be God working within us, there is doubt. As much as Augustine led Luther to depend on God’s grace for all that God wanted Luther to do, it was still a religion of doing, and hence a religion of uncertainty. As beautifully as the early Luther (along with Augustine) might speak about works arising not from ourselves but from faith in God’s grace, as long as grace was a quality imparted to the soul, there could be no real peace. As long as he interpreted the passages of Scripture that say we are saved by grace alone in the Augustinian sense, there could never be any certainty for Luther, and it was the matter of certainty that he had to work out.

Just how all of this was working itself out in Luther’s struggles we do not know. Green states that the 95 Theses and all the pressure that was brought to bear on him after they were published, were the cause of Luther’s further struggle to understand St. Paul-not the result of a clear understanding.<sup>60</sup> He says that as far as he could determine, Luther “presented the new concept in his treatise against Latomus in the summer of 1521. There he defined grace as the mercy or favor of God.”<sup>61</sup> To digress for a moment, recall that 1521 is when Melanchthon published his first *Loci* where he spelled out the meaning of grace clearly. Recall also the great praise Luther heaped on Melanchthon’s work. Green may have a point to his contention that Melanchthon was a real help to Luther and that the two of them forged ahead together to arrive at a consistent understanding of grace and a clear way of speaking about it.

### **Luther on Augustine**

This section is based on checking all the references to Augustine in the American Edition of Luther’s Works. While we do not have enough time to do a complete analysis of what Luther says about Augustine we can summarize and give a few important quotations from Luther.

Luther was well versed in Augustine. The editor of Volume One of the American Edition of Luther’s works writes, “it is beyond doubt that Luther had read widely in the works of St. Augustine.”<sup>62</sup> The index to Luther’s Works lists 104 different works that Luther quotes or the editors feel Luther alludes to. These represent most of the major writings of Augustine as well as broad sampling of letters and sermons. Luther quoted Augustine quite consistently throughout his entire life. There can be no doubt that Augustine was Luther’s mentor.

We can make the following general conclusions. Luther lectured on Psalms, Romans, Hebrews and Galatians between 1512 and 1519. Those lectures are filled with quotations from Augustine on basic points of teaching, particularly on grace. They show a Luther struggling to come to grips with grace. These comments, as Green pointed out Above, lead us to realize that Luther’s understanding of imputed righteousness was less than clear at the beginning. Up to and somewhat beyond the publication of the 95 Theses, Luther was essentially an

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, p. 158.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, p. 77.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, p. 158.

<sup>62</sup> LW, I, x, Introduction by Jaroslav Pelikan.

Augustinian. His reaction to Rome was not the reaction of a man who had come to understand grace as forgiveness, but of a man who understood that in order to become righteous, i.e. in order to fulfill the Law, a person must rely on God's power to do so. He was reacting against work righteousness in this sense: the Catholic taught that human efforts were necessary to earn grace and help keep the law, and Luther, following Augustine, taught that that power came only from God's grace.

The important thing is that Augustine's search resulted in a conversion experience in which he found the power he was looking for, while Luther would not allow himself to stop at that point. Even before he understood the matter clearly, Luther seemed to be able to see that such a teaching could not give peace to his conscience. There is an interesting statement in the First Psalm Lectures of 1513. In commenting on Augustine's conversion Luther said,

Take the conversion of Saint Augustine in Book 8 of his *Confessions*. Note there how he was disturbed and did not speak, and how he thought and meditated on the divine plans and counsels for the salvation of mankind, as here described. Hence one who has not experienced this remorse and meditation cannot be taught this Psalm with any words. It is difficult for me, too, because I am outside of remorse and yet speak about remorse. No one can worthily speak or hear any Scripture unless he is touched in conformity with it, so that he feels inwardly what he hears and says outwardly and says, "Ah, this is true! Therefore since I cannot speak of the practices of my remorse, I will proclaim it after the example and on the basis of the practice of blessed Augustine."<sup>63</sup>

We hear so much about Luther's awareness of his sins. Yet here he says he had not experienced remorse and admits he cannot muster the feelings he witnesses in Augustine. It doesn't seem to bother him, though. To me this is significant. It tells me that Luther's concerns were not the same as Augustine's. They were no less intense, but they were not fostered by the yearning of the human heart to overcome sin (which was Augustine's remorse) but by a heart that seemed to have the ability to see even in remorse a work of the Law that could not afford peace. Or, we might express it this way, that even at a time when Luther was struggling to overcome sin, he was guided by the Lord to sense that the ultimate answer could not be found in Augustine's experience. (You can be the judge of whether I am reading too much into this.)

After the 1519 Galatians lectures, references to Augustine's theology became fewer and fewer. Whereas before this Luther quoted liberally from Augustine's Anti-Pelagian treatises, afterward the majority of references are to points of exegesis, and to favorite topics such as the role of Monica in Augustine's life, and a few of Augustine's statements on forgiveness that Luther found great comfort in.

One finds Luther using Augustine in rebuttal to Catholic writers who used Augustine against him, particularly in regard to Augustine's understanding of the Church and Papacy. In his 1520 response to the *Bull of Excommunication*, Luther calls Augustine to his side, "Augustine says in his *Confessions*, IX, 'Woe unto every human life, even the most praiseworthy, were it to be judged without mercy.' Look how this great heretic, St. Augustine, speaks brazenly and sacrilegiously against the holy bull."<sup>64</sup> Luther treasures Augustine whenever Augustine speaks about forgiveness, for example when he says, "All saints need to pray: 'Forgive us our debts.'"<sup>65</sup> Luther also uses Augustine at Marburg in his debates with the Reformed on the Lord's Supper. In his mature years Luther always had great respect for Augustine, and always had good things to say about him. In his *Genesis Commentaries* Luther praises him for his "daily battles with the heretics."<sup>66</sup> He says of Augustine, "He devoted himself completely to the study of theology and became a teacher who shines in the church up to

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<sup>63</sup> LW 11, 36 – First Psalm Lectures, 1513-1515.

<sup>64</sup> LW 32, 85 – *Defense and Explanation of all the Articles*, 1520.

<sup>65</sup> LW 31, 213 – *Essays*, 1517-1520.

<sup>66</sup> LW 1, 213 - *Genesis Commentary* 1535-1536.

this day and teaches and instructs it,”<sup>67</sup> and “Augustine is certainly a princely elector in heaven.”<sup>68</sup> Augustine “freed countless souls from many errors and was second only to the Apostles in conquering so many heretics.”<sup>69</sup> One senses that Luther loved Augustine as his spiritual father to the day of his death, even though he knew he had advanced beyond him.

On the topic of this paper, grace, Luther makes it very clear what he thought about the church fathers, including Augustine. Once when he corrected Augustine, he said he did this “not to scoff at him, but to show that they [the fathers] are human beings. The Word is to be believed above the fathers.”<sup>70</sup> There are many good examples of Luther’s thought, but a few will have to suffice:

The papists say, “Do you think that all the Fathers were in error?” It is indeed painful to maintain this, especially about the better ones—Augustine ... and that entire company of lofty men.<sup>71</sup>

[On their understanding of the righteousness of God) it is true all the fathers, Augustine and Ambrose, had idle dreams and dashed against the stumbling block.<sup>72</sup>

You will not find anything about this distinction between the Law and the Gospel in the books of the monks, the canonists, and the recent and ancient theologians. Augustine taught and expressed it to some extent. Jerome and others like him knew nothing at all about it.<sup>73</sup>

So it is with the sectarians; they talk a great deal, but when one reads a book of theirs, it has no content. I have read Jerome; but when the reading was finished, the time had been wasted, for he says nothing to comfort the conscience. I have read through the books which Augustine wrote before his conflict with Pelagius and the same it true of them.<sup>74</sup>

In Augustine one finds too little faith. In Jerome, none at all.<sup>75</sup>

Ever since I came to an understanding of Paul, I have not been able to think well of any doctor of the church. They have become of little value to me. At first I devoured, not merely read, Augustine. But when the door was opened for me in Paul, so that I understood what justification by faith is, it was all over with Augustine. There are only two notable assertions in all of Augustine. The first is that when sin is forgiven it does not cease to exist but ceases to damn and control us. The second is that the law is kept when that is forgiven which does not happen. The books of his *Confessions* teach nothing; they only incite the reader; they are made up merely of examples, but do not instruct.<sup>76</sup>

Immediately following the famous quotation from Luther’s Preface to the Latin Edition of his works where Luther speaks about the gates of heaven being opened to him, he comments on Augustine’s role in his finding this hope,

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<sup>67</sup> LW 3, 159-160 - *Commentary on Genesis*, 1535-1536.

<sup>68</sup> LW 12, 298 - *Lectures on the Psalms*

<sup>69</sup> LW 7, 135 - *Lectures on Genesis*, 1535-1536.

<sup>70</sup> LW 4, 13-14 - *Commentary on Genesis* 1535-1536.

<sup>71</sup> LW 2, 55 - *Commentary on Genesis* 1535-1536

<sup>72</sup> LW 7, 252 - *Lectures on Genesis* 1535-1536.

<sup>73</sup> LW 26, 313 - *Lectures on Galatians*, 1535.

<sup>74</sup> LW 29, 32 – *Writings, 1521-1525*

<sup>75</sup> LW 30, 313 – *Lectures On I John*, 1527.

<sup>76</sup> LW 54, 49 – *Table Talk*, citation from 1532.

Later I read Augustine's *The Spirit and the Letter*, where contrary to hope I found that he too, interpreted God's righteousness in a similar way, as the righteousness with which God clothes us when he justifies us. Although this was heretofore said imperfectly and he did not explain all things concerning imputation clearly, it nevertheless was pleasing that God's righteousness with which we are justified was taught. (emph. mine)<sup>77</sup>

Finally, in another table talk, Luther clearly states the main issue with Augustine,

It was Augustine's view that the law, fulfilled by the powers of reason, does not justify, even as works of the moral law do not justify the heathen, but that if the Spirit assists, the works of the law do justify. The question is not whether the works of the law justify, but whether the law, kept with the Spirit's help, justifies. I reply by saying, No. Even if in the power of the Holy Spirit a man were to keep the law completely, he ought nevertheless to pray for divine mercy, for God has ordained that man should be saved not by the law but by Christ. Works never give us a peaceful heart. Christ would never have been sad in spirit unless he had been pressed hard by the law, to which he subjected himself for our sake.<sup>78</sup>

A good exercise sometime would be to run through some passages in the New Testament that use the word grace. Insert Augustine's understanding into the passage and then Luther's. The difference between them soon becomes clear, as does the outcome of their theology for the church.

Drawing on what we have learned so far, and adding some additional material, we can draw the contrast between Luther and Augustine. These contrasts are drawn sharply for emphasis. In reality one could argue for a less distinct line between them.<sup>79</sup> However, they will help us summarize the differences between the two men.

The basic issue in all of these distinctions is the meaning of the Gospel of God's grace. Luther and Augustine both taught that we are saved by grace. Augustine taught that grace was a power God infused in the Christian to give him the power to serve God while Luther viewed grace primarily as the favor of God on the world in Christ.

Luther and Augustine both taught that we are saved through Christ. Augustine taught that Christ's power cleanses us while Luther taught that Christ's atonement on the cross gives us the forgiveness of sins.

Luther and Augustine both taught that we are saved by faith. Augustine taught that faith is assent to the teachings of the Catholic Church and trust that God could be found there, while Luther taught that faith was the hand that accepted the gift of God's favor in Christ.

Augustine and Luther both taught that the will was bound in sin. Augustine, however, stressed the freedom of the will that God was wooing with his grace, while Luther stressed the fact that the will was hostile toward God and could only be changed by hearing God's verdict of "not guilty."

Augustine and Luther both taught justification. Augustine taught that justification was the sinner becoming more and more righteous until finally he was fully justified, while Luther taught that justification was won by Christ on the cross and received fully by faith in the Savior's work.

Augustine and Luther both taught that man was a rational creature. Augustine taught that we believe in order to understand, while Luther taught that by God's grace we believe a message that is inherently foolish to our sinful mind.

Augustine and Luther both taught about the means of grace. Augustine taught that God's grace was anything that led a person to trust in him, while Luther identified the means of grace with the Word and Sacraments, because they alone conveyed to mankind the message of grace: Christ crucified.

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<sup>77</sup> LW 36, 188 – *Preface to Latin Writings* 1545.

<sup>78</sup> LW 54, 10 – *Table Talk*, citation from 1531.

<sup>79</sup> Augustine's major treatises form the foundation of this paper. However, there is no such thing as Augustine's homiletical mode which may temper some of these characterizations of him. Professor E.C. Fredrich said that Augustine did not speak correctly about predestination in his formal works, but in his letters he speaks much more accurately about it.

Augustine and Luther both taught predestination. Augustine taught that God effects one's coming to faith by an appropriate set of graces, while Luther believed that the same grace is offered to all and we cannot explain why one accepts and the other rejects.

Augustine and Luther both taught that the condemned are lost through no fault of God. Augustine taught that God gave each person enough graces that those guilty of rejecting God cannot say God did not try to save them, while Luther would say that God gave even to those who reject his word the full measure of his grace, since all his grace is revealed in Christ's work for all sinners.

### Conclusion

The religious world is not so difficult to sort out. There are two basic streams of thought flowing together. Augustine can be considered the best of the "infused grace" strand, while Luther is the best of the "imputed grace" strand. All the differences between churches are only cosmetic compared to this basic difference. Pieper makes no overstatement when he writes, "Substituting grace in the sense of *gratia infusa*, or a good quality in man, for the *gratuitus favor Dei*, or combining the two, is the fundamental error of all who within Christendom depart from the pure Christian doctrine."<sup>80</sup>

There can be nothing that we can do as practical as discussing, studying, and asking the Lord to help us better understand Law and Gospel, sin and grace. It flows throughout our theology and informs all of the methods of our ministry.

Augustine has many good things to tell us, and he has told us much through Luther. However, Luther rose above him, and although he loved him he would not remain with him. He could appreciate all that Augustine did for him, but he was not afraid to censure his writings on the basic point of Christian faith-the Gospel of God's grace.

Augustine is still with us. He is alive in the majority of churches, he is alive in theology and practice. Many are teaching his view of grace and teaching others how to impart that grace to their hearers. He is also alive in us, leading us into the subtle shifts of emphasis that lead us into his brand of theology. Remember, Luther easily accepted Augustinism, but he struggled for years to move beyond it and keep himself and his church immersed in God's gracious favor in Christ. This is the struggle we have inherited as recipients of the Scriptural understanding of God's grace.

We must evaluate all areas of our ministry-preaching, teaching, evangelism, liturgy and music-in the light of the difference between Augustine and Luther. If we ever create a vacuum of the Gospel and replace it with pressure for sanctification, we will experience "conversions" but we will find ourselves burdened with a wrong understanding of grace-an understanding that will necessitate a new Reformation. However, if we patiently preach the Gospel of God's grace, lead our people to rest in the holiness they have received in Christ, and encourage sanctified living, we will give to future generations a clear understanding of God's gracious favor and a firm hope of eternal life.

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<sup>80</sup> Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics Vol. II*, 11.

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