

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE LUTHERAN? PROCLAIMING CHRIST IN THREE “SOLAS” OF THE LUTHERAN FAITH: Scripture Alone—Grace Alone—Faith Alone

John D. Schuetze

Part One: Scripture Alone—A Uniquely Lutheran Doctrine

A couple of years ago I read the results of a survey that the county paper had taken. It asked area church leaders to answer questions about heaven and hell. Here is a sample of the responses:

What is heaven like? Our church sees heaven not so much as a place but as an inner way of being. One could say it was like a deep feeling of joy, contentment, and knowledge—an inner strength.¹

Who will go to heaven? There are many who claim only Christians go to heaven, based upon a few particularly exclusive gospel texts. This limits God far more than I am willing, and it implies that two thirds of the world (including Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, Native Americans, etc.) simply has it wrong. I prefer to err on the side of an inclusive spirituality, even leaving open the possibility of universal salvation (i.e., all God’s children go to heaven) rather than attempting to spell out the conditions for getting through the pearly gates. Admittedly this perspective dismisses the notion of “judgment” (which upsets many commandment-keeping Christians) but in doing so it also dismisses any notion that we would earn our way to heaven. God’s everlasting covenant (to be with us) is not based on our merit but purely on God’s grace.²

Is there a hell? I like to believe that everyone goes to the same place and those of poor character or habits would find heaven a hell because they would have no tools or ability to make sense of it. This sounds reasonable until I think of people like Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin. They cannot be in the same place as most folk. Therefore there must be a special place for such people.³

This paper was delivered at the Western Wisconsin District Convention, June 13-14, 2010.

¹Trudy Mandel, Director of Religious Education, Unitarian Church North, Mequon, WI

²The Rev. Franz Rigert, Pilgrim United Church of Christ, Grafton, WI

³The Rev. Jay Lambert, St. Boniface Episcopal Church, Mequon, WI

We can understand why everyone in the world doesn't believe the same thing about God and the afterlife. All people do not look to the same book as the source of truth. Those of the Jewish faith follow the Old Testament scrolls as understood in the rabbinic writings. Muslims look to the Qur'an. New Age philosophy looks to the god within us all. Atheist Ellen Johnson believes no God exists, much less a heaven or hell.

But what about us as Christians? If we all hold the Old and New Testament Scriptures as the source of truth, why is there such a wide variety of answers to simple questions about heaven and hell and who goes where? The answer to this question is two-fold. First, all within Christianity do not look to the same source. Second, all do not use the same methods to understand the Bible.

Perhaps we don't always realize it, but the doctrine of *sola Scriptura* is uniquely Lutheran. This is good news and bad news. It is good news because we are Lutheran. It is bad news because those outside of Lutheranism reject it. Consider the Roman Catholic Church. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*⁴ states,

Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture, then, are bound closely together and communicate one with the other. For both of them, flowing out from the same divine well-spring, come together in some fashion to form one thing and move towards the same goal.⁵

Later in that same book it states, "The Roman Pontiff, by reason of his office as Vicar of Christ, and as pastor of the entire Church has full, supreme, and universal power over the whole Church, a power which he can always exercise unhindered."⁶ From this we see that the Roman Catholic Church looks to the papacy as the primary source of doctrine. In second place is Sacred Tradition with Sacred Scripture coming in a distant third.

The Eastern Orthodox Church looks to a single source—Holy Tradition. One theologian explains, "We take special note that for the Orthodox, the Holy Bible forms a *part* (emphasis his) of Holy Tradition."⁷ Timothy Ware (Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia) goes on to explain what all is included in this term:

⁴Unlike Luther's Small Catechism, the Catechism of the Catholic Church is not designed as a teaching tool. It is the official doctrinal book of the Roman Catholic Church.

⁵*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Liguori, MO: Liguori Publications, 1994, paragraph 80.

⁶*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 882.

⁷*These Truths We Hold*, (Compiled and Edited by a Monk of St. Tikhon's Monastery), South Canaan, Pennsylvania: St. Tikhon's Seminary Press, 1986, p. 224.

Orthodox are always talking about Tradition. What do they mean by that word? A tradition is commonly understood to signify an opinion, belief, or custom handed down from ancestors to posterity. Christian Tradition, in that case, is the faith and practice which Jesus Christ imparted to the Apostles, and which since the Apostles’ time has been handed down from generation to generation in the Church. But to an Orthodox Christian, Tradition means something more concrete and specific than this. It means the books of the Bible; it means the Creed; it means the decrees of the Ecumenical Councils and the writings of the Fathers; it means the Canons, the Service Books, the Holy Icons—in fact, the whole system of doctrine, Church government, worship, spirituality, and art which Orthodoxy has articulated over the ages.⁸

Contrasting this with the Lutheran approach, one Orthodox writer concluded, “For the Orthodox Church the Christian faith and experience can in no way be compatible with the notion of *Scriptura sola*.”⁹

But what about the Evangelical¹⁰ churches? Wouldn’t many of them be sympathetic to *sola Scriptura*? Don’t they also have a high view of Scripture? Don’t they also stand with us on Scripture? Unfortunately, they also have other sources of truth. Most hold to what is called “The Wesleyan Quadrilateral.”¹¹ They believe that God makes his will known to us in four different ways:

- Scripture (Old and New Testaments)
- Tradition (the two-millennia history of the Christian Church)
- Reason (rational thinking and sensible interpretation)
- Experience (the Christian’s personal and communal journey in Christ)

To demonstrate how this can play out in a real-life situation, consider this example:

A missionary speaker paused in the middle of his message and said something like this: “I didn’t plan to say this, but it seems the

⁸Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, London, England: Penguin Books, 1993, p. 196.

⁹Daniel B. Clendenin, *Eastern Orthodox Theology: A Contemporary Reader*, Grand Rapids: MI: Baker Books, 1995, p. 82.

¹⁰We could speak of ABC Evangelicalism which consists of Arminians, Baptists, and Calvinists. It is a movement that emerged in the 20th Century and represents a wide range of denominations that are part of the Evangelical Movement. Within the WELS culture these churches are often wrongly referred to as the Reformed Churches. Today the term “Reformed” denotes churches that hold to Calvinist theology.

¹¹Although this is not a term John Wesley used, it does describe his theology. The term itself was coined by 20th century American Methodist Albert C. Outler in his introduction to his 1964 collection entitled, *John Wesley*.

Lord is indicating that someone in this church has just walked out on his wife and family. If that is so, let me tell you that God wants you to return to them and learn to follow God's pattern for family life." The missionary did not know it, but in the unlit balcony sat a man who had entered the church moments before for the first time in his life. The description fitted him exactly, and he made himself known, acknowledged his sin, and began to seek after God.¹²

Just as the various camps of Christianity outside of Lutheranism do not limit themselves to *sola Scriptura*, so they do not apply the same methods (hermeneutic) in understanding the Bible. Again, we allow the various camps to speak for themselves.

According to a saying of the Fathers, Sacred Scripture is written principally in the Church's heart rather than in documents and records, for the Church carried in her Tradition the living memorial of God's Word, and it is the Holy Spirit who gives her the spiritual interpretation of the Scripture (according to the spiritual meaning which the Spirit grants to the Church).¹³

Here a distinction must be drawn between legislative authority and judicial authority. In the U.S. federal government, the houses of Congress produce legislation, but the judiciary (ultimately the Supreme Court) decides what the legislation means. They are separate branches of government, each with its own appropriate authority. This seems to be a good way to think of the relationship between Scripture (legislative authority) and reason (judicial authority).¹⁴

Truth is truth,¹⁵ whether scientific truth or theological truth, whether found in the psychologist's laboratory or in the Bible student's library. To speak of biblical truth as somehow more authoritative than scientific truth is really absurd.¹⁶

These last two quotations stress the place that reason has in some circles. As Lutheran Christians who hold to the unique doctrine of *sola Scriptura*, we also use our reason to understand the Bible. However, we believe that Scripture is the master and reason (intellect, emotions, will) is the servant.

¹²Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994, p. 1056, 1057.

¹³*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 113.

¹⁴Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998, p. 282, 283.

¹⁵This author is explaining the statement "All truth is God's truth." This is a hermeneutical principle that is popular in Evangelical circles. It seeks to integrate secular truth with biblical truth.

¹⁶Larry Crabb, *Understanding People*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1987, p. 40.

Without a doubt, reason is a servant who serves us well. Think of some of the amazing things that human reason has brought us in the past century. With cell phones we can text those across the country and with satellite phones we can talk with those around the world. The Internet has brought the world to our doorstep even as it takes us to the ends of the earth. The music that we formerly had in boxes of record albums, then cassette tapes, then CDs, can now be contained in an iPod. I do not see any new inventions coming out of the animal kingdom, but I see the human mind doing some amazing things. Reason is a remarkable gift of God. Think of how these inventions of human reason have enhanced the ministry of your church.

The Lutheran doctrine of *sola Scriptura* does not reject human reason, for human reason allows us to understand Scripture. Martin Luther wrote,

As dearly as we love the gospel, so diligently let us hold to the study of languages [The preceding context makes it clear that he had in mind especially Hebrew and Greek]. And let us recognize the fact that we will not be able to preserve the gospel well without the languages. The languages are the scabbard in which this sword of the Spirit is sheathed. They are the jewel box in which we carry this treasure. They are the cask in which this beverage is contained. They are the pantry in which this food is kept. And as the gospel itself shows, they are the baskets in which these loaves and fish and fragments are preserved.¹⁷

Our human reason enables us to study these languages and understand them. It is this same ability to reason that gives us the capacity to believe the message that these languages convey. Luther stated,

One would have to preach to a donkey, a horse, an ox, or a cow for a hundred years before they would accept the law, although they have ears and eyes and a heart, just as man. They too can hear it, but it does not strike the heart. Why? What is lacking? The soul is not so formed and created that such things can strike it.¹⁸

Human reason is a great gift, but it is not a saving gift. For unless the Holy Spirit converts our reason, we are worse off than a donkey, horse, ox, or cow. These animals are not moral creatures accountable to God. We human beings are. But without the work of the Holy Spirit, our reason fails us when it comes to believing what the Bible says. It does not make sense to me that some scraps of parchment found decades ago in a dusty cave near the Dead Sea in a distant land have anything to say to me today as I live in 21st century America. It does not make sense to think that "there is no one who does good, not even

¹⁷*Luther's Works*, American Edition, 45:359-60. Translation Revised.

¹⁸From *Luther's Works*, Weimar Edition, 16:447.

one" (Ps 14:3). I see so many people that Scripture calls "wicked" doing so many good things in response to a disaster in Haiti. It does not make sense when the Bible says, "Whoever does not believe will be condemned" (Mk 16:16). I think of an unbelieving friend or relative. He is a good person. And now you are telling me that he will suffer for an eternity in a place called hell simply because he didn't trust in a Jewish man who lived and died almost two millennia ago? None of this makes sense to me. But it is what the Bible says and therefore it is true, even though I cannot reason it out. Scripture alone is the master; reason is the servant.

Human reason is a remarkable gift which serves the Lutheran doctrine of *sola Scriptura*. The Holy Spirit worked with me as a rational creature as he brought me to faith. He took my mind and made it the mind of Christ (1 Cor 2:16). He took my unwilling will and made it willing, one that "wants to do what is good" (Ro 7:18). He made my heart rejoice in the Lord always (Php 4:4). As a child of God I confess with my mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and I believe in my heart that God raised him from the dead (Ro 10:9). Scripture alone can tell me this. The Holy Spirit alone can make me believe this. My reason provides the capacity to confess this.

What does this doctrine of Scripture alone mean for our lives, our practice, and our fellowship?

This past decade brought us a number of reports on Bible literacy. Most prominent was the *Bible Literacy Report: What Do American Teens Know and What Do They Need to Know*. Produced by the Bible Literacy Project, this 2005 report included feedback from a sample of 1002 teenagers. It found that "almost one out of ten teens believes that Moses is one of the twelve Apostles. About the same proportion, when asked what Easter commemorates, or to identify Adam and Eve, responded 'don't know.'"¹⁹ Less scientific was a survey Jay Leno took of his audience on *The Tonight Show*. Clayton Hardiman of the Religion News Service reported,

During the taping of one of his television shows, Leno moved through his audience asking people what they knew about the Bible. "Name one of the Ten Commandments," he said. "God helps those who help themselves?" someone ventured. "Name one of the apostles," Leno told them. No one could. Finally, he asked them to name the Beatles. Without hesitation, the answer came ringing from throughout the crowd: George, Paul, John and Ringo.²⁰

¹⁹*Bible Literacy Report: What Do American Teens Know and What Do They Need to Know*. Front Royal, VA: The Bible Literacy Project, 2005, p. 6.

²⁰<http://home.snu.edu/~hculbert/literacy.htm> accessed May 26, 2010.

In a recent issue of *Modern Reformation*, David R. Nienhuis offers some interesting insights into declining biblical literacy. He writes,

There are, no doubt, many reasons for the current predicament. In general we spend far less time reading anything at all in this culture, much less dense and demanding books like the Bible. Not long ago I met with a student who was struggling in one of my courses. When I asked her what she thought the trouble was, she replied, in a tone suggesting ever so slightly that the fault was mine, "Reading a lot is not a part of my learning style." She went on to inform me that students today learned more by "watching videos, listening to music, and talking to one another." She spoke of the great growth she experienced in youth group (where she no doubt spent a lot of time watching videos, listening to music, and talking with people), but her ignorance of the Bible clearly betrayed the fact that the Christian formation she experienced in her faith community afforded her little to no training in the actual *reading* of Scripture.

Indeed, a good bit of the blame for the existing crisis has to fall at the feet of historic American Evangelicalism itself. In his book *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—and Doesn't*, Stephen Prothero has drawn our attention to various religious shifts that took place as a result of the evangelistic Second Great Awakening that shook American culture in the first half of the nineteenth century, key characteristics of which continue to typify contemporary Evangelical attitudes. For instance, there was a shift from learning to feeling, as revivalists of the period emphasized a heartfelt and unmediated experience of Jesus himself over religious education. While this strategy resulted in increased conversions and the creation of numerous popular nondenominational voluntary associations, it also had the effect of requiring Christians to agree to disagree when it came to doctrinal matters. There was a corresponding shift from the Bible to Jesus, as more and more Christians came to believe that the key test of Christian faithfulness was not the affirmation of a creed or catechism, or knowledge of the biblical text, but the capacity to claim an emotional relationship with what Prothero calls "an astonishingly malleable Jesus—an American Jesus buffeted here and there by the shifting winds of the nation's social and cultural preoccupations."

The most important shift, according to Prothero, was the shift from theology to morality. The nondenominationalist trend among Protestants tended to avoid doctrinal conflicts by searching for agreements in the moral realm. Christian socialists, such as Charles Sheldon, taught us to ask not "What does the Bible say?" but "What would Jesus do?" Advocates of the Social Gospel, such as Walter Rauschenbusch, taught that it was more important to care for the poor than to memorize the Apostles' Creed.

Christians schooled in this rather anti-intellectual, common-denominator evangelistic approach to faith responded to the later twentieth-century decline in church attendance by looking not to more substantial catechesis but to business and consumer models to provide strategies for growth. By now we're all familiar with the story: increasing attendance by means of niche marketing led church leaders to frame the content of their sermons and liturgies according to the self-reported perceived needs of potential "seekers" shaped by the logic of consumerism. Now many American consumer-congregants have come to expect their churches to function as communities of goods and services that provide care and comfort without the kind of challenge and discipline required for authentic Christian formation to take place.²¹

And now on the heels of the Church Growth Movement and the Megachurch Movement, we have the Emerging Church Movement which downplays doctrine and dogma even more.

Brothers, we are Lutheran Christians who are heirs to the unique doctrine of *sola Scriptura*. Because we cherish this doctrine, we will use the best methods available to teach it and preach it. We will make our sermons the best sermons that we can write and deliver them in the best way we can deliver them. We will make our religion classes interesting for our students, places where *sola Scriptura* touches the emotions and stimulates the minds of our hearers. We will make our church websites as appealing as possible and our church grounds as attractive as possible because it will allow us to share *sola Scriptura* with those who don't know it. We will think creatively on how we can share this "saving sola" and act in Christian love towards our brothers and sisters as we do so because a house divided cannot stand. We will see the Bible not as a book to debate but as a mine to explore and a message to share. We will see proclaiming *sola Scriptura* not as an end in itself but as a means to an end—getting souls to heaven. What does *sola Scriptura* mean for our lives, our practice, and our fellowship? It means everything. *Sola Scriptura* proclaims the words of eternal life.

Part Two: Grace Alone—A Comforting Lutheran Doctrine

Did you ever wonder why there isn't a "grace chapter" in the Bible? There is a "resurrection chapter" (1 Co 15) and a "love chapter" (1 Cor 13), as well as a "faith chapter" (He 11). But there is no single chapter of the Bible that is known as the "grace chapter."

Had the Holy Spirit inspired one of the New Testament writers to pen such a chapter, it might sound something like this:

²¹David R. Nienhuis, "The Problem of Evangelical Biblical Literacy: A View from the Classroom," *Modern Reformation*, Jan/Feb 2010, 19:1, 10-13.

In grace God searched out Adam and Eve when they ate from the forbidden fruit.

In grace God pledged them the promised Seed to save them from their sin.

In grace God commanded Noah to build an ark. In grace he gave the people of Noah's time decades to repent of their sin and look to him for hope.

In grace God kept his promise to Abraham even though he tried to help God along (Hagar) and attempted to pass his wife off as his sister.

In grace God called Job to repentance when he questioned God's governance of the world and challenged God to explain.

In grace God called Moses to lead his people out of Egypt even though Moses killed a man in cold blood.

In grace God gave his people manna to eat and quail to hunt when they complained against him in the desert.

In grace God promised to give David a greater Son even though his love triangle led to conspiracy and murder.

In grace God reminded his whining prophet Elijah that there were still 7000 believers in Israel who had not bowed the knee to Baal.

In grace God called some fishermen, a tax collector, and other unlikely candidates to serve as his apostles.

In grace God reinstated Peter even though he disowned his Savior in his time of need.

In grace God took a doubting Thomas and made him a believer.

In grace God didn't destroy that greatest persecutor of the early church but instead made him the greatest missionary the church has known.

As we can see, God doesn't give us a "grace chapter." He gives us a "grace book." From start to finish, the Bible is the story of God's grace, the story of "by grace alone."

Sometimes when I ponder the points in a particularly dark biblical account, this God doesn't seem gracious at all. He destroys the world with a universal flood, causes the earth to swallow the wives and children of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram because of something their husbands had done. He allows Satan to strike Job—a man whom God himself describes as blameless and upright. He lets his prophets be persecuted and his Son be executed. And who can forget about Ananias and Sapphira—he strikes them dead for telling a lie. Sometimes God doesn't seem too gracious. It is no wonder that out-spoken atheist

Richard Dawkins has called him “arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction.”²²

This is where we need to step back and look at the big picture. There are many trees in this forest called “God” that we cannot understand. In pondering God’s presence Luther commented,

Nothing is so small but God is still smaller, nothing so large but God is still larger, nothing is so short but God is still shorter, nothing so long but God is still longer, nothing is so broad but God is still broader, nothing so narrow but God is still narrower, and so on. He is an inexpressible being, above and beyond all that can be described or imagined.²³

The same could be said about God’s grace. Nothing is so gracious, but God is still more gracious. *Sola gratia* is the ray of hope that breaks through this forest and shines as bright and long as the summer sun in northern Wisconsin.

But what exactly is meant by the word “grace?” “Grace” is used in a variety of ways within the Christian church. Roman Catholic theology speaks of infused grace while Arminian theology speaks of prevenient grace. Ironically, both terms end up denying what Scripture teaches about grace.

“Grace” is also used in a variety of ways in the Bible. Grace moves God to show compassion to human beings. “It is by grace you have been saved” (Eph 2:8). Grace is what God gives human beings so that they can show compassion to one another. “Grace was given the Macedonian churches” (2 Cor 8:1). Grace is a gift we don’t deserve. “I am unworthy of all the kindness (graces)²⁴ and faithfulness you have shown your servant” (Gn 32:10). Grace sustains us when we bear the cross. “My grace is sufficient for you” (2 Cor 12:9). Grace is something we use to bless God’s people. “May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you” (2 Cor 13:14). Grace is a state in which we live as Christians. “We have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand” (Ro 5:2). Grace is a place we fall from when we fall from faith. “You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen from grace” (Ga 5:4). Grace is stronger than sin. “Where sin increased, grace increased all the more” (Ro 5:20). Grace makes us what we are. “By the grace of God I am what I am” (1 Cor 15:10). Grace increases in our believing hearts as the knowledge of Scripture increases. We “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pe 3:18).

²²Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, New York: Houghton Mufflin Company 2008, p. 51.

²³*Luther’s Works*, American Edition, 37:228.

²⁴The Hebrew has the word *chesed* which denotes God’s gracious and steadfast love.

When we as Lutheran Christians use the phrase *sola gratia* (by grace alone), we are using it as a synonym for the gospel. "Grace and truth came by Christ Jesus" (Jn 1:17), the apostle John tells us. In a gospel sense, grace is God's undeserved love and favor which moved him to send his Son, Jesus Christ, to do what we couldn't do (keep the law perfectly) and do what we wouldn't want to do (pay the price of our sins). When Scripture says, "By grace you have been saved," it means that God did everything to earn our salvation and we did nothing. Such words affirm *sola gratia*.

The apostle Paul describes how God put his grace into action: "You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor so that you through his poverty might become rich" (2 Cor 8:9). We see God's grace most clearly in the life and death of Jesus Christ. In grace he was conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of a woman named Mary who gave birth to him even though she was a virgin. In grace he was "tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin" (He 4:15). In grace "he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows" (Is 53:4). In grace he "died for our sins according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor 15:3). In grace he "was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor 15:4) "for our justification" (Ro 4:25). In grace he promised "to prepare a place for us" (Jn 14:2) in heaven. In grace he will come as a rider on a white horse "to strike down the nations and rule them with an iron scepter" (Re 19:15). In grace he will then say to each one of us, "Blessed are you who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb" (Re 19:9).

Scripture teaches that our eternal life is not only by grace but it is also by grace alone. When Luther translated the Bible into German, he included the word "alone" (*allein*) in Romans 3:28. "Therefore we hold that a man is righteous without the works of the law, but alone through faith." Some have accused him of adding to Scripture, of imposing his doctrine on the pages of Scripture. When accused of adding to Scripture, Luther replied,

You tell me what a great fuss the Papists are making because the word "alone" is not in the text of Paul. Say right out to [those who object]: "Dr. Martin Luther will have it so." I know very well that the word "alone" is not in the Latin or the Greek text.²⁵

Writer Bob Thiel sees this as proof that Luther wanted to assert his ideas above the truth of Scripture: "This passage strongly suggests that Martin Luther viewed his opinions, and not the actual

²⁵Stoddard, John L. *Rebuilding a Lost Faith*. New York: P. J. Kenedy & Sons, 1922, pp. 101-102.

Bible as the primary authority—a concept which this author will name *prima Luther*.²⁶

Yet Luther's inclusion of the word "alone" in his translation of this verse reflects both the tree (Ro 3:28) and the forest (Scripture). *Sola gratia* is not just a doctrine of the Reformation. It is a truth of Scripture. We are saved by grace—God's undeserved love shown us in Christ. We are saved by grace alone—Christ did it all.

What does this doctrine of grace alone mean for our lives, our practice, and our fellowship?

The Lutheran doctrine of *sola gratia* means everything for our Christian lives. We begin with our election because that's where God's grace first expressed itself. In eternity God chose us to be his children. The fact that he did this before we were born demonstrates that grace is grace and that it stands alone in God's plan for our salvation. We didn't have a chance to contribute anything, because we weren't born yet. There is much about the doctrine of election that we cannot understand. There is much about this doctrine that Scripture does not answer. Why me? Why you? Why us? Why did God elect us from eternity? The only answer to these questions is *sola gratia*. It was all in God and nothing in me. That's where *sola gratia* begins.

But that is not where it ends. For the doctrine of election teaches us that by grace alone God determined in eternity to do what he then carried out in time—our salvation. The next part of the divine plan for our personal lives was our conversion. That also affirms *sola gratia* because we were dead, blind, hostile, and ignorant. We had hearts of stone and an imagination for sin. As a member of the Mequon Police Reserve I am required to take EVOG (Emergency Vehicle Operation and Control) training every year. For the final test we have to drive a squad car through an obstacle course. Since we are timed, the goal is to drive as fast as possible around the pylons. The tires squeal at takeoff and screech around the corners. The steering wheel is jerked from one side to another as the car snakes through the serpentine course. The transmission is jammed into forward, then reverse as one maneuvers through the route. Each driver treats the car in a reckless manner. It's no wonder that the vehicles need regular transmission maintenance and that the tires are replaced every 500 miles. That describes us at the beginning of life. We were on a course headed for hell and we were pursuing it in a reckless and determined manner. We were going as fast as we could. Each of us was determined to set a record for sin.

²⁶*Sola Scripture or Prima Luther?* What did Martin Luther Really Believe About the Bible? <http://www.cogwriter.com/luther.htm>, accessed May 27, 2010.

But in grace God got us off this course. He made us do a 180. “Turn me and I will be turned” is how the prophet put it (Jeremiah 31:18). God got us on the road to heaven. Unlike the highway to hell, this road is not a multi-lane freeway. The path is narrow. The way is difficult, even impossible, to navigate alone. That is why those on this road are praying, “Jesus, Savior, pilot me.” We can’t travel this road on our own. We don’t have the spiritual skills, but Jesus does. In his grace, he takes us along for the ride. And he does all the driving. That is grace alone.

This same God who converted us also preserves us. Even though Scripture speaks about how we cooperate with God in our Christian living (2 Cor 6:1), even our Christian life of sanctification affirms *sola gratia*. That which cooperates with God is our new man, the saint in us, that person that came to life when God brought us to faith in Christ as our Savior. We can’t take credit for our new man—he is a gift given by grace alone. And the gospel which motivates him to live a God-pleasing life is also a gift from God. We don’t preserve ourselves in the faith. God preserves us and he does so by grace alone.

It is by grace alone that we will one day be glorified. When we stand before the throne of God it will be by grace alone. When we see our Redeemer with our own eyes it will be by grace alone. When we as the bride of Christ enjoy the wedding supper of the Lamb, it will be by grace alone. *Sola gratia* means everything for our lives. It means salvation.

Sola gratia also means everything for our practice. For grace received is grace to share. As Martin Luther recaptured the biblical doctrine of “by grace alone,” he not only had to stress that grace is alone; he also had to explain what grace is. That’s because the church of his day defined grace as an ability that God gives human beings which enables them to earn their own way to heaven. The Roman church still defines grace in this manner:

The grace of Christ is the gratuitous gifts that God makes to us of his own life, infused by the Holy Spirit into our soul to heal it of sin and to sanctify it. It is the sanctifying or deifying grace received in Baptism. It is in us the source of the work of sanctification.²⁷

Moved by the Holy Spirit, we can merit for ourselves and for others all the graces needed to attain eternal life.²⁸

Within the Roman Catholic Church, grace is something God gives us so that we can do our part to earn our salvation. This is why the Roman Catholic Church is willing to concur that salvation is by grace

²⁷*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 1999.

²⁸*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 2027.

alone.²⁹ But their definition of grace deprives one of the comfort and confidence that the biblical doctrine of *sola gratia* gives. At best, it gives the person a “wallet on a string.” Allow me to explain. At a flea market I once saw a young boy playing a little game with people who walked by. He was hiding under a table and had a wallet on a fishline. He would throw it onto the place where people were walking and wait for people to reach down to pick it up. As soon as they did, he would pull it away. He was having the time of his life playing this game. Sadly, the Roman Catholic Church plays this same game with God’s grace—the assurance that Christ forgave our sins and earned us heaven. They toss out the wallet. But as soon as people reach for this hope and comfort, they pull it away. Jesus died for your sins, but you still have to do something. Yes, he earned you heaven, but you will still have to go through purgatory. Yes, your loved one is with the Lord, but you still need to have some masses said for this person just to be sure. Yes, Jesus paid for the eternal consequences of your sin, but you still have to pay for the temporal consequences.

Scripture teaches grace alone. When people repent, we can assure them Christ died for their sins. When people die in the Lord, we can assure the survivors that those who die in the Lord are with the Lord. *Sola gratia* means everything for our lives and the lives of those we serve. *Sola gratia* means everything for our practice. We can proclaim a grace that is free. We can proclaim a gospel that has no strings attached.

Sola gratia also means everything for our fellowship. It means Christ would have us show the same grace to our brothers and sisters in the faith that he shows to us. “As I have loved you, so you must love one another” (Jn 13:34). “As we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers” (Ga 6:10). “How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity” (Ps 133:1). God has told us to proclaim the gospel of grace alone. He has not told us how. In love, we will be gracious to creative brothers and sisters who are willing to try something new. In love, we will also be gracious to those who raise concerns and question whether our creative approach is a wise approach. God gives a diversity of grace/gifts (χαρίσματα) to his church. He asks us to use those gifts in a wise and faithful manner.

Think of how often the apostle Paul used God’s grace to encourage believers in the faith. He opens and closes all of his letters asking that

²⁹This is reflected in the Joint Declaration on Justification signed by the ELCA and the RCC. It reads, “By grace alone, in faith in Christ’s saving work . . . we are accepted by God.” <http://www2.elca.org/ecumenical/ecumenicaldialogue/romancatholic/jddj/declaration.html>, accessed June 8, 2010.

God's grace would be with them. That is surprising when we consider that he was writing to brothers and sisters who were guilty of jealousy and quarreling (1 Cor 3), who failed to apply Christian admonition (1 Cor 5), who were taking each other to court (1 Cor 6), who lacked propriety in worship and even abused the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11), who challenged his apostolic ministry (2 Cor 10), who were eager to pursue another gospel (Ga 1), and who were confused about Christ's second coming (1 & 2 Th). In spite of this, Paul's dealings with them began and ended with God's grace. May our fellowship also be shaped by grace. Like Paul, we may have something to say to a brother or sister who is striving to share God's grace with a diverse culture. And like Paul, may our words begin and end with grace.

Part Three: Faith Alone—A Simple Lutheran Doctrine

The final *sola* of Lutheran doctrine is a simple one—*sola fide*. How do we make this saving gift of God's grace our own? The same way we make a piece of pie our own when someone offers it to us—we take it. There is nothing complicated about that. Faith is the hand that takes what God gives. I don't work for the pie by taking it. I don't earn it by placing it in front of me. So it is with my eternal life. God baked this pie of salvation. It is large enough to feed the entire world. In love he cuts it up and offers me a generous slice. Even though many others have turned up their noses at this slice of salvation, the Holy Spirit led me to take it. That's what faith is. Taking what God gives me in Christ. That is the simple doctrine of *sola fide*.

However, this simple truth is bookended by two other doctrines. On one end are the means of grace—the gospel in the Word of God and the sacraments. We have already considered the Word as we looked at *sola Scriptura*, but what about the sacraments? God also uses the gospel in baptism and the Lord's Supper to work and strengthen faith in our hearts. We cannot understand how this can happen. We pour water over an infant's head. We speak some simple words. And God works faith in a person's heart. The child becomes a child of God. The same is true with the Lord's Supper. We place a piece of bread in someone's hand or mouth. We give them some wine to drink. We comfort them with some words. Once again God gives the gift of faith as he strengthens the person with the gospel. Christ's body—for you. Christ's blood—for you. The same hand that receives the bread and takes the cup takes the gift of forgiveness. That's what faith is—taking what God gives us in Christ. This faith alone saves us.

It was Maundy Thursday evening. As Jesus gathered with his disciples, he assured them, "Anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these" (Jn 14:12). Ever since I was a child, I marveled at Jesus' words that open

this chapter: “In my Father’s house are many rooms . . .” But only in the last several years have I begun to marvel at what Jesus says a few verses later. When I entered the public ministry, I never thought that my service to others would surpass that of Christ. It would have seemed arrogant to suggest such a thing. But that is what Jesus promises here. He says that as his followers we will do greater things than he did. Imagine that. Jesus healed the sick, raised the dead, delivered those who were demonized, fed the masses, filled the nets, and calmed the storms. He walked on water—literally. We don’t. Instead we do something even better. We work the miracle of faith as we share that Bible story with our first-grade class. We work the miracle of faith when we pour water on the head of an infant or adult. We work the miracle of faith when we distribute the bread and wine in the Lord’s Supper and assure people, “This is given and shed for you.” These miracles aren’t as impressive to the eyes as what Jesus did. But our Savior himself says they are greater. One day God will pull back the curtain and will allow us to see the impact that our miracles in Jesus’ name had on the lives of others. Jesus’ miracles fed people for a day or gave them new physical life. But the miracles we do in Jesus’ name impact people for an eternity and give new spiritual life. More evidence of God’s grace.

The other doctrine that bookends *sola fide* is *solo Christo*—by Christ alone. Faith alone saves only when it relies on Christ alone. Perhaps you have heard about the wedding ceremony of Satoko Inoue and Tomohiro Shibata which took place in Tokyo in the middle of May. What made this occasion a groundbreaking event is that it was officiated by a four-foot-tall robot named, I-Fairy. As a pastor I have performed many weddings, and it bothers me to think I could be replaced by a robot. Even more alarming are all the things that replace Christ. In place of Christ’s perfect robes—our filthy rags. In place of the foolishness of the cross—our human wisdom. In the place of *sola fide*—universal salvation. In place of objective truth—subjective opinions. All of these replace Christ. They offer a way of salvation that is not based on Christ alone.

In his book, *A Generous Orthodoxy*, Brian McLaren relates a conversation he had with his college-age son:

I asked him how he was doing spiritually.

“I’m struggling, Dad,” he said

“Tell me about that,” I said.

He replied, “Well, Dad, if Christianity is true, then nearly everyone I love is going to be tortured in the fires of hell forever. And if it’s not true, then life has no meaning.” He was silent for a moment and then added, “I just wish there were a better option.”

My heart was broken. I asked, "Is that the understanding of Christianity you got from me?"

He replied, "No, but that's the way most Christians think. They just kind of bottom-line everything to heaven or hell, and that makes life feel kind of cheap."

My son's insight doesn't apply to the best expressions of conservative Protestants, but it does, I fear, apply too often to the most popular ones. He put into blunt and powerful terms exactly what I felt vaguely and inarticulately when I was his age.³⁰

Elsewhere, McLaren explains,

The church must present the Christian faith not as one religious army at war against all other religious armies but as one of many religious armies fighting against evil, falsehood, destruction, darkness, and injustice.³¹

Before some readers wish to embroil me in debates about whether Allah of Islam is the same God as Yahweh of the Bible, please allow me to show at least a few Muslims the same grace Jesus showed: (a) a Roman centurion when Jesus said he had not seen such faith in all of Israel and (b) a Syrophoenecian woman when he told her she had great faith. And please allow me to believe that if God would use stars to lead wise men (astrologers) from the East to Jesus, God might also speak to Muslims in terms of their own worldview and vocabulary.³²

Brian McLaren professes to be Christian, yet is uncomfortable with Christ alone. Instead he sees the gospel as that which Steve Chalke calls "a symbol of love, a demonstration of just how far God as Father and Jesus as his Son are prepared to go to prove that love."³³

But *sola fide* relies on *solo Christo* and on what Christ alone did for us. As our Great High Priest he offered the "once for all sacrifice" (He 10; 1 Pe 3:18). When he lived, God announced, "This is my Son, whom I love. With him I am well pleased" (Mt 3:17). When he died, he declared, "It is finished" (Jn 19:30). John called him the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (Jn 1:29). Peter confessed him as the Christ, the Son of the living God (Mt 16:16). He is the saving Seed of the Woman (Gn 3:15) and David's greater Son (Ps 2). He is

³⁰McLaren, Brian D., *A Generous Orthodoxy*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004, p. 55,56.

³¹McLaren, Brian D., *The Church on the Other Side*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000, p. 84.

³²McLaren, Brian D., *A Generous Orthodoxy*, p. 298 fn.

³³Chalke, Steve, *The Lost Message of Jesus*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004, p. 183.

the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth (Re 1:5). He is King of kings and Lord of lords (Re 19:16). *Sola fide* without *solo Christo* is an empty faith and a false hope. Saving faith trusts in Christ alone.

What does this doctrine of faith alone mean for our lives, our practice, and our fellowship?

The citizenship, the sojourn, and the home of Christians are not in this world but in heaven. This is correctly taught, but not easily learned; rightly preached, but not so soon believed; correctly impressed upon the hearts, but not easily followed; well said, but poorly practiced. Were we to confess the truth, we would have to admit that we seldom think of the fact that we must at last depart and leave this life; and for that reason our mind is not constantly set on our eternal home.³⁴

This is one of my favorite Luther quotes. It reminds me that what I know and confess, I struggle to apply. I talk the talk, but I struggle to walk the walk. I know I am only a stranger in this world, and yet I live as though I am a citizen. I long for my heavenly home and boldly confess to others, “I can’t wait to get there.” But then under my breath I softly mutter, “But not now, Lord.” “I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far,” I say with the apostle Paul (Phlp 1:23). But then when I fear God might answer this prayer, like Hezekiah I roll over, turn my face to the wall, and pout.

This demonstrates that I need to grow in my faith. How does this happen? Remember the bookends. The Holy Spirit uses the means of grace to draw me closer to Christ. But because the Holy Spirit is in the Word, I need to be there too. And these means of grace need to be front and center in our worship life. Worship is something we do for God but Lutheran worship centers on what God did for us. This is what makes Lutheran worship different from much of worship that occurs outside of Lutheranism. In keeping with the *solas* of the Lutheran faith our worship flows from the priesthood of all believers and centers on the proclamation of the gospel. Christ gave the means of grace to all Christians, a truth which is also reflected in our worship. The presiding minister leads the people in proclaiming and applying the gospel of forgiveness. He can do this because he has been called to carry out this representative ministry. Yet the people are not passive in the service. As part of the priesthood of all believers, they join in this proclamation of the gospel. And they join this proclamation through Word and sacrament because this alone is what the Holy Spirit uses to create and strengthen faith alone in Christ alone.

³⁴Martin Luther, as quoted by Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 3, p. 86.

In other parts of the Christian church there are far more up arrows than down arrows. Worship is primarily praise given to God. And this praise does not always center on the means of grace. In the Roman Catholic Church the mass (Lord's Supper) is the center of the service. But recall that within this church the Lord's Supper is a sacrifice (something we do for God) rather than a true sacrament (something God does for us, i.e., forgive our sins). The same holds true in the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Eastern Catholic Church. For the most part, worship in Evangelical churches also has more up arrows than down arrows. Once again the sacraments are something we do for God. Baptism and the Lord's Supper are ordinances the Christian performs to show he is a Christian. Styles of worship may vary by culture and place. Yet as Lutheran Christians who strive to proclaim the *solas* of by Scripture alone, by grace alone, by faith alone, and by Christ alone, we will also want to keep the means of grace at the center of our worship. In doing so our worship will also fulfill a fifth sola: *solī Deo gloria*—glory to God alone.

Concluding Thoughts

In the summer of 2008 Mark Driscoll preached a doctrinal series at his Seattle megachurch. He jokingly called the series "megachurch suicide," for doctrine and dogma are not popular words today. If you want to attract the crowds, presenting doctrine does not seem to be the way to go. But he persisted. And the people came.

We might also be shy about the Lutheran doctrines we have considered here. Does a "my karma ran over your dogma" generation really want to hear about *sola Scriptura*, *sola gratia*, and *sola fide*? Even much of the Christian church has moved beyond that. In portraying the Emerging Church Movement of which he is a part, Scot McKnight notes that he sees himself as "post-doctrine." His movement is more concerned about right living than right teaching. He explains,

The emerging movement tends to be suspicious of [doctrine]. Why? Because the diversity of theologies alarm us, no genuine consensus has been achieved, God didn't reveal a systematic theology but a storied narrative, and no language is capable of capturing the Absolute Truth who alone is God. We believe the Great Tradition offers various ways for telling the truth about God's redemption in Christ, but we don't believe any one theology gets it absolutely right.³⁵

We are being counter-cultural for focusing on doctrine in this paper. Yet your committee was not only wise to suggest this topic but

³⁵*Christianity Today*, Feb 2007, p. 38

also to ask us to consider how these *solas* apply to our lives, our practice, and our fellowship. Contrary to the opinion of some, doctrine is not a stuffy subject that God gives us so that we can have something to discuss at conventions and conferences. The doctrines of Scripture address practical matters that make up the stuff of life.

My wife has a niece who recently lost her house. She and her husband faithfully saved for the twenty percent down payment. They managed their finances well and had an excellent credit rating. They carefully searched and finally bought the house of their dreams. Within a few weeks, they discovered it had termites. They tried to go back to the previous owner, but he had skipped the state. The house inspector claimed he didn't inspect for termites—that wasn't part of the contract. They could do nothing more than walk away from their house.

A good house begins with a solid foundation. Scripture tells us to build on the foundation of the apostles and prophets with Jesus Christ himself as the chief cornerstone. But a good house also needs a solid structure. A sand castle built on a rock is still a sand castle. As Lutheran Christians, we have a solid foundation on Scripture alone, grace alone, and faith alone. But these are not just truths to stand on and preserve. They are also truths we live and practice and celebrate with one another. They are truths we use as we work together to build God's church.