

## CONVENTION ESSAYS - 1996

### JUSTIFICATION IS BY GRACE

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#### Introduction

A woman who had been visiting my congregation for a number of weeks came to me one Sunday after worship service and said: "You know, I've been a member of a Pentecostal church for twelve years and have visited many other churches, and this is the first time I've ever heard of grace." She did not mean to say that she had never heard the term grace before, but that she had not had the concept of grace explained and applied to her as we in the Evangelical Lutheran Church explain and apply it. My delight over her statement was dispelled however, several months later when this same woman—who had consequently begun Adult Instruction and had her five children baptized—expressed concern to me that we in the Lutheran Church spoke "too much about the grace of God and not enough about what man has to do." She has since left our midst because she felt that our Lutheran concept of grace could lead people into a false security by making the Christian faith a license to sin.

I mention this woman as a very real example of what I believe is one of the fundamental struggles of the Christian faith—the struggle to come to terms with the grace of God. Not only is the concept of grace hard for the believer to grasp and understand, but the application of grace in the life of the man who is *simul iustus et peccator* is extremely difficult, as Luther himself says: "To appreciate grace is the supreme and most difficult art one can find on earth, so that even St Paul must confess and say that it is an unspeakable gift (2 Cor. 9:15)."<sup>i</sup>

In addition, we are finding that we live in a world and at a time where visible Christendom itself seems to have lost its way regarding the grace of God, that is at the same time increasingly apathetic to sound doctrine and godly living, and increasingly hostile to the gospel. With their catch-cry of "deeds not creeds," many of the "Christian" churches today are so busy trying to put into place all of the secular sales techniques that they have been taught to use in their quest to vie for the public's attention and support, that they have little time or inclination for doctrinal discussions. Should we be all that surprised, then, that the woman mentioned above had never heard of grace even though she had been a member of a "Christian" church for twelve years?

We, as members of the CELC, are facing enormous, and very real, challenges in presenting and applying the biblical view of justification by grace through faith to the people of the twentieth century—both within our churches and without. It is for this reason, then, that such discussion regarding the foundation of our faith—justification by grace—is so vitally important for us. And it is with this in mind that I am very pleased to be present here today, although I cannot but feel overwhelmed by the task set before me. It is not my intention to present a strict doctrinal thesis on justification by grace—that has been done all too well by men far superior in learning to me. Rather, as a novice to the public ministry, I thought I would touch on those facets of the doctrine of justification by grace that I have found to be of greatest comfort and spiritual benefit to me in my own personal pilgrimage of faith.

In addition, since all doctrinal discussions are, to some degree, polemic, our attention must naturally be focused on those aberrations that are causing the greatest concern to us and to our people as we struggle to maintain the truth of justification by grace in increasingly ungodly times. It is my prayer that this will give us the opportunity, not only to get together and compare notes (which is essential), but especially enable us to sharpen each other in our faith,<sup>ii</sup> spiritually and intellectually, in order that the help and support that we gain here at this conference may be brought to the people of our congregations and respective nations.

## The Necessity of Grace

To discuss the topic of God's grace, we must begin first by discussing man's relationship with God. Ever since Bonhoeffer, I believe, in discussing man's precondition before God the question the church has been asking is "Who are you?" But Scripture observes that the question God asks in the garden is not "Who are you, Adam?" but "Where are you?" In other words, God is asking: Where are you now in your relation to God? Where are you now in your relation to your neighbor? This is the question that must be answered before we may begin to have our eyes and hearts opened to the truth of God's grace, for we will have no higher love for the grace of God than when we appreciate fully our predicament, our dis-location from the God who created us.

This dis-location with God is the root, not of man's alienation from God, but of his deep enmity with God, which thus shows itself in natural man's intense hatred of both God's law and his gospel. While it is true that natural man has a hostility towards God's law because he doesn't like being told what to do, his natural hatred of the law is only surpassed by his natural hatred of God's grace in the gospel. The thing that is most hateful to our natural, religious selves is the freedom and the grace of God. Consider how the Israelites responded to the grace of God as they walked through the wilderness on their way to the Land of Promise after they had been liberated from slavery. They responded to God's grace in three ways—they complained about God's way, they complained about God's food, and they were continually wishing that they could be back in slavery. The problem is that, as Dostoyevsky's character of the Grand Inquisitor asserts in *The Brothers Karamozov*, mankind doesn't want this freedom of the gospel.

What natural man hates about it, first, is that to be a recipient of the free grace of God, this fellow—the flesh—must be crushed. This is not a matter of suicide—self-imposed humility. That man is willing to do as the steady growth of such law-oppressive religions as Islam and Mormonism readily attest. As I heard a pastor aptly put it: "Monasticism is a good patriarch." The way of grace is that God crushes us.

Second, what we hate about the grace of God is that it shows that we are, and always will be, as Luther noted, nothing but beggars. We can never get beyond "Lord, have mercy on me" and "Blessed are the poor." This is the kind of poverty where we have lost our claims to anything before God. The only thing we can stake our life on is that God is not a liar when he tells us that he saves us, loves us, and makes us his own—that is, that God justifies us by his grace.

While I was in Peru last year at an ELS Missionaries' Conference, this story was related to me by one of the Peruvian missionaries, a professor at the seminary in Lima. One of his former students, now a pastor, was speaking to him about the topic of justification and said: "The day you taught us in class about God's justification by grace, I had to put my head down on the desk to hide my tears. It was the most stirring thing I had ever heard, that God would save such a wicked person as myself. I thought, what a blessing to be a part of a church that teaches God's grace as it truly is. I am so thankful to God that he has saved me by his grace." While appreciating this gentleman's joy over finding a gracious God, I also felt somewhat ashamed that Dogmatics class did not have the same impact on me (tears were shed only at exam time!). It brought to mind the weeping of the woman over the feet of Jesus in the home of the Pharisee, and the consequent statement by Jesus: "Her many sins have been forgiven—for she loved very much. But he who has little forgiven loves little" (Lk. 7:47).

Without the revelation of God's grace, natural man is driven by the law to try to save himself. For within the heart of every man is the *opinio legis* (the opinion of the law) by which man views the law as the instrument for merchandising with God. Inherent in this thought is the belief that when man comes to God with good works, God must reward him. This may also be called the Law of Retribution—good is rewarded, evil is punished—and natural man, and indeed all of the world's religions, are driven by it. In order to get the sun to shine and the crops to grow, in order to find happiness and success, in order to be rich, natural man thinks he must somehow earn something with God, which God is then obliged to repay.

The Roman Church takes this Law of Retribution even further with their doctrines of *meritum de congruo* (a reward from God corresponding to man's use of his natural abilities) and *meritum de condigno* (the reward due the person who, in the "state of grace," performs divinely prescribed works). Boiled down this means that if you can earn enough grace through your natural good works, then you can work out your own faith and save yourself. To put it another way, grace in the Roman Church (and much of Protestantism) is a celestial substance, like a heavenly Uranium 238. And what we all need is a little shot of it in us, and once we have it, it radiates through our entire being. Thus, according to Rome, while it is natural that you think a religious thought, when you get grace, you will think a higher religious thought. While it is natural that you love God, when you get grace, you will now love him a lot. But grace is not a bonus put on nature. In fact, as Luther says: "To want to merit grace by works which precede faith is to want to appease God by sins; which is nothing but adding sins to sins, laughing at God and provoking him to wrath."<sup>iii</sup>

What natural man is unable to see is that both the wrath of God and the grace of God are revelations—disclosures by God—and not conclusions that can be drawn from a rational set of arguments. For while man insists that his natural predisposition is to the good, or that he is at least morally neutral, the revelation of the Scriptures tells us that man's precondition is to be ungodly (Rom. 3:23; 5:8). Luther, in speaking of this original sin, states: "This hereditary sin is so deep a corruption of nature that reason cannot understand it. It must be believed because of the revelation in the Scriptures (Ps. 51:5; Rom. 5:12ff; Exod. 33:20; Gen. 3:6ff)."<sup>iv</sup> This revelation of the wrath of God, the very antithesis of grace, is paradoxically, the necessary precondition to prepare the heart for the reception of God's grace.

And yet, in a certain sense, we find natural man acknowledging that the world is indeed damned. Have you ever noticed how many people acknowledge the wrath and condemnation of God? You don't have to go very far to realize this—just go to any place of work, or drinking, or playing. Go out into the field with the farmer who is trying to fix the combine. Turn on any movie made in Hollywood in the last ten years. Walk into a bar or go to a sporting event, and you will hear the curse of God everywhere. Have you ever gone to a gas station and the mechanic dropped a wrench on his foot? Did he bless the wrench? What man is revealing by this constant cursing is the simple fact that everything is under a curse, as Scripture says.<sup>v</sup> They are joining God in speaking to Adam: "Cursed is the ground because of you" (Gen. 3:17).

What natural man can not acknowledge is that the consequence of the curse is condemnation. Since no man may escape this condemnation by himself or his own works, we in the Lutheran Church speak of the necessity of grace. By this we do not mean that it was necessary for God to give and apply his grace to man,<sup>vi</sup> but that grace was necessary for man in order to escape the curse. Without grace, we all stand cursed and condemned, from the least to the greatest. But into this damned world God brings his grace. To Adam and Eve hiding in sin in the garden God pronounces his promise of a Seed who will crush Satan's head (Gen. 3:16). To Abram God said, "I am going to bless you" (Gen. 12:2). This was not a conditional blessing, as though God said to Abram: "If, how, or when you get your life straightened out, then I'll bless you." Instead God said, "I'm going to make you a blessing. You will be blessed, and in your Descendant all the nations of the earth will be blessed." That is grace. And Abram believed God, and God made a judgment on him—"There is a righteous man."

Abram's righteousness was not something inherent in his nature, but a declaration made by God while he was still ungodly. That natural man, who cannot meet God's standard of righteousness (and is cursed and damned in the process), is at the same time declared righteous and given the righteousness of Christ freely is at the heart of Luther's discovery of the grace of God. Paul Tournier, the Swiss psychologist and author, himself a member of the Reformed Church, is nevertheless quite perceptive in his evaluation of Luther's discovery of grace:

Luther, an impetuous man, driven to despair by the feeling of guilt, after vainly plunging into penances and mortifications, discovered afresh in his turn that salvation is not earned, but is a gift from God, free and offered in advance to the sinner, and that it is sufficient to accept it

by faith. From his cry of relief, the Reformation was born, like an explosion, at a time when the Church was insisting on works, merits and indulgences, all of which laid the cost of salvation upon men's souls.vii

Initially, Luther understood the "righteousness of God" as a quality in God in which he is righteous and holy, and demanded righteousness of mankind. Luther confessed that he hated the term the "righteousness of God" for it was a continual reminder to him of how far removed he was from that righteousness. It was only when the Holy Spirit revealed to him that the "righteousness of God" was not so much a quality of God but the declaration of God towards him on account of his Son that he tasted the full sweetness of God's grace. This then is the reality of the relationship between the law and grace, that "those who are the most desperate about themselves are the ones who express most forcefully their confidence in grace."<sup>viii</sup> In other words, those who are most pessimistic about man are the most optimistic about God; those who are the most severe with themselves are the ones who have the most serene confidence in divine grace.

### The Essence of Grace

What, then, is the grace of God? That in his own unmotivated love, God chose, by the most horrendous exchange, to make your sin and hatred of him be borne by himself in his Son, in order to give you in his name everything that is right, holy, and true forever. When the blood of Jesus was shed, God was doing the work of fully killing, fully paying for the sins of unjust, ungodly sinners. Or to put it more eloquently: "A death sentence hung over all humanity, and the death of God was the only way out from under the sentence. Mankind was in bondage, death's hostage. And so death had to die. But life itself was the price—the life of God embodied in the human flesh of Jesus. There was no way around death for Jesus. He came, he insisted, for this very purpose: 'to give his life as a ransom for many' (Mark 10:45)."<sup>ix</sup> On the basis of that death, everything the Father owns, you now own, for he has made it yours!

From this we see that grace is not a change in man, but, anthropopathically speaking, a change in God.<sup>x</sup> It has nothing to do with man's works but solely with the work and mercy of God, a change from dis-favour to favour, as Luther says: "Grace signifies that favor with which God receives us, forgiving our sins and justifying us freely (*gratis*) through Christ. Do not consider it a quality (in man), as the sophists dream it is."<sup>xi</sup> This change did not take place as if God one day simply changed his mind so that he decided not to punish us but to grant us grace. God's disposition towards mankind was always one of loving concern, even prior to the creation itself, as St. Paul says: "Before he made the world, his love led him to choose us in Christ to be holy and blameless in his sight. In the kindness of his will he appointed us long ago to be made his sons by Jesus Christ. He did this in order that the glory of the grace which he bestowed on us in his dear Son might be praised" (Eph. 1:4-6).

I know for myself personally, who was first introduced to the true grace of God as an adult, the concept of the exclusivity of God's work in salvation—the unmerited favour of God (*Favor Dei*)<sup>xii</sup>—was the turning point in my relationship with God from unbelief to a true and living faith. I remember clearly the day when the pastor had me open the Bible at Ephesians chapter 2 and I read for the first time verses 8 and 9: "For by grace you have been saved through faith and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God not of works, lest anyone should boast" (NKJV). Initially, I couldn't believe that the Bible was so clear on this point, for I was convinced that Christianity was a religion of works. And yet here it was in black and white for all to see. This text was to be my "Romans 1:17," where God opened my eyes to his grace in all its beauty and splendor. As I look back now, I sometimes wonder whether I had a clearer view of God's grace then, at that moment of revelation, than I do today even with my superior learning and experience. There is so much that can cloud one's view.

Furthermore, when we talk about grace, we dare never stop talking about Christ, for grace can never be divorced from his person and work. Pieper writes: "As grace is denied when human merit is united with it (Rom. 11:6, 'is no more grace'), just so grace is abrogated if it is severed from Christ's vicarious satisfaction."<sup>xiii</sup> Indeed, Luther continues: "These promises of grace are all

based on Christ from the beginning of the world, so that God promises this grace to no one in any other way than in Christ and through Christ.”xiv From this we see that true grace, far from being free, involved a great cost—the death of the Son of God. Luther states that it is a characteristic of heathen religions that they would believe in God without the “cost,” without the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: “Faith in God alone is not sufficient, but the cost (die Kosten) must also be there. The Turks and the Jews also believe in God, but without the means and the cost. What then is the cost? . . . Christ here [in the gospel] teaches us that we are not lost, but have eternal life, that is, that God so loved us that he was ready to pay the price of thrusting his only, his dearest Child into our misery, hell and death, and having him drink that up. In that way we shall be saved.”xv This, then, is true grace. that in Christ God turns his face to us and shines on us and says, “I love you.”

Finally, one cannot talk about grace without talking about its universality. That is, that grace is for all, and therefore is for me. This leads us into discussion on how grace may be applied to us personally.

#### The Application of Grace—the Use of the Means of Grace

It is important that we keep in mind that for Luther and the Reformers, to whom we owe our great Lutheran heritage, the doctrine of justification by grace was not just a matter of theoretical reflection. It was the issue of the Christian faith and the pastoral ministry. Luther’s deep concern for the souls under his care sprang from his own experiencing of the grace of God, and must be identified as the major theological issue in the Reformation. As one Lutheran theologian notes: “In a real sense, the 95 theses owe their existence to a crisis in pastoral care. Luther was induced to take up the question of indulgences more from a pastoral concern than by scholarly considerations. A cheap grace, which was really no grace at all, was being substituted.”xvi

A cheap grace—“which is really no grace at all”—is still being substituted in our churches today, and so the warning of Jude still holds for us: “It is necessary that I write to you and urge you to fight for the faith once entrusted to the believers. There are some people who have sneaked in among you . . . ungodly persons who turn the grace that our God has for us into unrestrained lust and who disown our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ” (v.4).xvii It was this very real danger that the woman I mentioned in the introduction had regarding our Lutheran concept of grace. And not without some justification, it seems, for even as early as three weeks ago a member of my own congregation, during a Bible study on the book of Galatians, responded: “If what you say about salvation by grace alone is true, then I can do anything I want and still be saved?” To which I replied, “Yes, but who are you and what do you want?”

In addition, while we have to face and combat this danger of the cheapening of grace, at the same time we also must contend against those who, like the Judaizers of old, turn the grace of God into “another Gospel which is really not ‘gospel’ at all” (Gal. 1:7). These are those who would turn the sublime purity and freedom of grace into another law, as we read in the following statement in a Seventh Day Adventist publication: “The Scriptures declare that ‘God is love’ (1 Jn. 4:8). He reaches out to humanity ‘with everlasting love’ (Jer. 31:3). The God who extends the invitation to salvation is all-powerful, but his love necessitates his permitting each person to have freedom of choice in responding (Rev. 3:20,21). Coercion, a method contrary to his character, can have no part in his strategy.”xviii The message is subtle and persuasive—God’s grace is there for all, but the individual must choose to receive it. So while God’s grace is presented, it is effectively overruled by an appeal to law—that of the self-decision of the individual to whom it is offered.

Both these errors spring from the misapplication of grace (Walther—the law and gospel not being rightly divided). The former error misuses grace to justify sin, the latter to turn sinners back to the law. Both errors are rife in our Lutheran churches, for a number of reasons. First and primary, I believe, because of the ever-increasing use of unbiblical counseling by our pastors and lay people. I don’t mean to say by this that all counseling is bad. What I am saying is that the essence of much counseling—including much that is labeled “Christian counseling”—is the

blatant denial of sin and guilt by either negating the reality of sin, or by fostering the very popular habits of blame-shifting, excusing, and rationalization. In addition, much counseling stresses the individual's need to change himself, to love himself, to feel good about himself, and basically to work out his own salvation. In my own limited experience, it seems the more a person has been exposed to counseling, the more they are able to explain why they committed a certain sin, but the less they are able to take ownership of that sin or make specific confession of it. It seems to me (and I stress seems) that as the use of professional counselors increases there is a corresponding decrease in the use of or perceived need for confession and absolution, which is nothing less than the daily application of law and gospel in the life of the Christian. The result is, as Koehler states, that "Those who fail to deal concretely with their sins are in danger of eventually losing the seriousness of sin altogether."<sup>xix</sup>

As Christians, our work in confession is not to talk about what our father was like or what our mother was like or what our spouse is like, but what we are like. This involves more than acknowledging our sinfulness in vague generalities—it means being specific. Someone once said that God knows men's backsides better than he knows their faces because they are always running away from him. That is the natural response of sinful man to a holy God. It is only in the light of justification by grace that the contrite sinner will run to God with his sin rather than away from God. And when he runs to God, he runs to confess, and to receive grace—"In confession we come to a place where we realize how small we are and how great God is. That is a good setting for forgiveness."<sup>xx</sup> Thus in confession we learn to be true human beings by stopping all the self-deception, the lies, the hiding, the blaming, the excusing. In confession we learn to be real sinners.

I do not intend this to be a side-track away from the point at hand—justification by grace. Indeed, I believe that this is critical to the discussion. I have found, in my own congregation, that while the need for pastoral counseling has risen dramatically (I would estimate that I have had at least one fourth of my members come to me with some specific counseling problem), there is little, if any, corresponding need for private confession of sins. In fact, there is the perception that private confession, if necessary at all, is only needed for "serious" sins. In other words, it is perceived to be the exception, rather than the rule. When I suggest that perhaps the problem for which they come to me stems from an inner guilt that needs to be confessed, I am looked at "as a cow looks at a new barn door." And when I do finally get someone to the point of making confession, they have a great deal of difficulty knowing how to go about it. This is the result, I believe, not only of an ignorance of the mechanics of confession, but most importantly, because they are scared to confess, because they don't really know the grace of God. But, I agree with Tournier who writes: "General affirmations about the forgiveness of God have not at all the effect of a categorical, personal, individualized word pronounced with conviction on behalf of God and addressed to the man who has confessed his sin."<sup>xxi</sup>

So we need to teach our people about the importance of confession—not only public confession in worship, but also individual confession among themselves, and private confession to the pastor. They need to be taught first and foremost that confession of sins, while never an end in itself, is the means to an end, that of taking hold of the grace of God. In addition, as Lutherans whose doctrinal heritage is firmly rooted in the role of the Word and Sacraments in conveying the grace of God, we need to stress to our people that the absolution is more than just the promise of forgiveness, or the assurance or reassurance of God's grace, but the very act of application of grace to the sinner. It is the work of God himself effecting the remission of sins purchased by Christ for the individual. As such, the essence of the absolution is independent of the human worthiness of the person making confession. The cause of our forgiveness is not the sincerity of our confession or the depth of our contrition or anything else in us. Rather, the cause of forgiveness is the grace of God—that God speaks to us in the wounds of his crucified, risen, and ascended Son and announces peace and forgiveness to us.

This is a call to faith that our people are finding more and more difficult to believe in the face of Reformed and Evangelical literature, which echoes the words of the Pharisees that it is

blasphemous to say that God forgives sins on earth out of the mouth of a man. But if we want to promote the proper applications of grace in the lives of the people of our congregations, then I believe we need to get them out of the counseling mode and back into the confession and absolution mode. We need to be retaught that it is at confession that we are, in fact, living the victorious Christian life, and that the absolution is God's power for true Christian living.

Another factor that is fostering a misapplication of grace in the life of the Christian is the misuse of the doctrine of prayer. For much of Christendom the focus of man's relationship with God and the means through which grace is thought to be received is prayer. But prayer is always the result, not the cause, of grace. When we were children, we learned to talk by imitating our parents. Our parents spoke, and we responded. True prayer is like that—our Father, God, and our Mother, the Church, speak to us and bring us grace through the Word and the Sacraments, and we respond with prayer. Indeed, the only person who is really qualified to tell us who our Father is, is our Mother. So it is that the Church, which shows us and tells us who our Father is, at the same time teaches us how to talk to him. Thus I must know God as my Father first, before I will come to him as Father. I must first hear and believe that God is merciful to me before I can come in prayer to ask mercy of God. I must first be taught the grace of God before I come to him in all the filth of my sin imploring for that grace. Therefore, true prayer is always based on the promises of God, which are found in his Word spoken by the Church through the Means of Grace.

Grace thereby discloses our true relationship with God and reveals that we are not, as one Lutheran pastor I heard so eloquently put it, "spiritual bastards" in this world. We have a heavenly Father who loves us with a love that can hardly be understood, but can be believed because of the revelation of the Scriptures. I think that the child-Father relationship needs to be stressed in our day particularly, with the wide-scale breakdown of the family and the growing up of so many children today without fathers. They need to know that they have a Father! And our Father God has not only demonstrated his grace by means of the person and work of Christ, but also in that he continues to offer his grace to us through his own divine instruments. In the Lutheran Church the Word, holy Baptism, and the Lord's Supper are the "giving means"xxii whereby grace is continually offered to and received by man. They are the application of grace to the sinner in such a way that he is able to take hold of God's grace and the forgiveness, new life, and salvation that go along with it.

Special emphasis needs to be placed on these sacraments today by the Evangelical Lutheran Church, as we battle for the hearts and minds of our people with those enemies who would empty the sacraments of their grace-bestowing power. Our people need to be continually instructed and comforted with these truths: 1) that the Word of God is not dead but "living and active" (Heb. 4:12)—moving, creating, judging, killing, making alive, drying up, refreshing; 2) that in Holy Baptism it is God, not man, who is working by bringing, offering, and sealing his grace in Christ to us. Since Scripture tells us that when we are baptized with Christ, we are buried with Christ into death (Rom. 6:4), we state categorically that the doctrine of justification by grace is therefore found just as clearly in the doctrine of Holy Baptism as it is in the Second Article of the Apostles' Creed; and 3) that in the Lord's Supper, once again it is the high, majestic God, beyond whom there is nothing and no one, who joins himself with the lowest and the simplest of his own creation and gives that blessed union to us to eat and to drink. In all three ways God continues to apply and bestow his grace on us.

#### Man's Response to Grace

According to St. John, the Christian life is not lived in word and speech only, but in deed and in truth (1 Jn. 3:18). So the concluding question to ask is: How, then, shall we, as God's children, respond to his grace? I believe the answer to this question, while not a simple one, is tied up in Christ's response to the woman caught in adultery in John 8:11: "Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more" (KJV). Here we have our Lord himself showing us the relationship between justification by grace and the response of faith. The essence of justification by grace is non-condemnation—"Neither do I condemn you." God's law says to the adulteress: "Kill her!" The only

way Jesus can dare say this is if he himself is going to bear the brunt of the condemnation of the law. That is the authority of Jesus to forgive sins. Then he gives her a life of freedom—"Go and sin no more."

The power of grace to dominate in the life of the believer is the power of the Word of the gospel to forgive sins. In the latter part of the eighth chapter of John Jesus says: "Everyone who keeps on sinning is a slave to sin. A slave does not stay in the home forever; a son stays forever. If, then, the Son sets you free, you will certainly be free" (vv. 34-36). In the light of this text, Jesus' words, "Go and sin no more," mean, I believe, first, that on account of God's grace in Christ, sin does no longer dominate me—it is not my lord and I am no longer its slave. Second, the sin that is present and active in the life of the believer—not only externally but also in the heart—is to be confessed, for Christ has said, "It is mine." And third, with that sin that remains and that is confessed, I do what Jesus tells me to do—I deny it. This is not denial in the psychological sense as if I never said or did it. Rather, this is denial in the sense that as a sinner who has confessed it and has had grace applied by the Word of absolution, I deny that this sin owns me. This is the ongoing work of Holy Baptism, in which the first denial we make is to renounce the devil and all his wicked works and all his wicked ways.

This, then, is the essence of justification by grace—that what God has done and continues to do in his means of grace is to kill us, justly and rightly with Christ, and to raise us up by grace in the glory of his resurrection. To practice using that in our baptism, in holy absolution, and in the reception of the Lord's Supper is to teach each other how to trust that word of grace, so that the damned corruption of our sin that dogs us day by day may be divorced from us day by day. The shape of the Christian life, therefore, is the shape of the cross, which is a great offense, both to the world and to the majority of visible Christendom. What is so offensive is that, as Senkbeil notes: "All complex theological argument and intellectual debate recede in the face of the cross. You don't argue your way to this truth. You don't arrive at this conclusion by rational debate. Human wisdom will always consider this message foolishness and weakness. 'But the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength' (1 Cor. 1:25)."xxiii To teach our people, and ourselves, how to live in the freedom of this grace, then, is our sacred and most difficult task. It is also an urgent one for this world grows steadily more ungodly and the "love of most grows cold" (Mt. 24:12). Like the prophet Isaiah, we are given the word of grace, not only for our own comfort, but also that we may:

"Comfort, comfort my people,"  
says your God.  
"Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,  
and cry to her  
that her warfare is ended,  
that her iniquity is pardoned,  
that she has received from the Lord's hand  
double for all her sins" (Is. 60:1,2).

But while justification by grace is God's way of setting man free from wrath and the curse, it also involves the death of our sinful nature, which is neither pleasant nor comfortable. Our response to God's grace, therefore, will always be imperfect—a mix of doubt and joy, of fear and peace. As man has only one hope for justification—God's grace—so he has only one hope for sanctification, and in this grace he finds the blessed freedom to "serve God in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness." As the heart of man is continually prepared for this grace by the law, so it is that the heart needs to hear and to apply the word of grace continually through the Means of Grace in order to lay the conscience to rest and assure the sinner that he does indeed have a gracious God. This is the heritage that we cling to and continue to fight for, as we triumphantly sing:

By grace I'm saved, grace free and boundless;  
My soul, believe and doubt it not.

Why waver at this word of promise?  
Has Scripture ever falsehood taught?  
So then this word must true remain:  
By grace you, too, shall heav'n obtain.

By grace God's Son, our only Savior,  
Came down to earth to bear our sin.  
Was it because of your own merit  
That Jesus died your soul to win?  
No, it was grace, and grace alone,  
That brought him from his heav'nly throne.

By grace! Oh, mark this word of promise  
When you are by your sins oppressed,  
When Satan plagues your troubled conscience,  
And when your heart is seeking rest.  
What reason cannot comprehend  
God by his grace to you did send.

By grace to timid hearts that tremble,  
In tribulation's furnace tried—  
By grace, despite all fear and trouble,  
The Father's heart is open wide.  
Where could I help and strength secure  
If grace were not my anchor sure?

By grace! On this I'll rest when dying,  
In Jesus' promise I rejoice.  
For though I know my heart's condition,  
I also know my Savior's voice.  
My heart is glad; all grief has flown  
Since I am saved by grace alone.

#### SOLI DEO GLORIA!

#### End Notes

- i Pelikan, J. (Ed.) *Luther's Works: American Edition*, 1967. Concordia Publishing House: St. Louis MO, Vol. 52, p. 199.
- ii "As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens the wits of another" (Proverbs 27:17).
- iii Plass, E., *What Luther Says: An Anthology*. Concordia Publishing House: St. Louis, MO, 1959, Vol. II, p. 604.
- iv Tappert, T. G. (Ed). *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Smalcald Articles, Part 1, para. 3, p. 302.
- v "There is a curse on all who depend on doing what the Law says, because it is written 'Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the book of the Law'" (Gal. 3:10).
- vi "A 'necessity' of grace must not be ascribed to God, grace is necessary for sinful man if he is to come into possession of salvation. The theory of speculative theologians and philosophers that the redemption of the world by Christ represents a necessary evolution of the divine essence is a pagan (pantheistic) speculation. According to Scripture, God extends His mercy in Christ to mankind freely (John 3:16; Luke 1:78) . . . Dogmatically this has been expressed thus: God is a *causa libera* of our salvation" (Pieper, F., *Christian Dogmatics*. Vol II. Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis MO, 1951, p. 6).
- vii Tournier, P., *Guilt & Grace*. Harper & Row Publishers, San Francisco, 1973. p. 194.
- viii Tournier, p 159.

- ix Senkbeil, H. L., *Dying to Live: The Power of Forgiveness*. 1959, Concordia Publishing House: St Louis, MO, 1994, p. 43. Vol. II, #1837, p. 603.
- x “Those who are not My people I will call ‘My people,’ and those who are not loved I will call ‘My loved ones’; and where they were told, ‘You are not My people,’ they will be called sons of the living God” (Hosea 2:1,23; 1:10).
- xi Plass, p. 604.
- xii Luther: “According to the usage of Scripture, grace signifies that favor of God which wishes us well and justifies us” (Plass, Vol. II, p. 603).
- xiii Pieper, Vol. II, p. 19.
- xiv Plass, p. 604.
- xv Pelikan, I. (Ed. ) *Luther’s Works: American Edition* 1967. Concordia Publishing House: St. Louis, MO. Vol. 51, p. 349.
- xvi Koehler, W. J., *Counseling and Confession: The Role of Confession and Absolution in Pastoral Counseling*. 1982 Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, MO, p. 39.
- xvii All Scripture quotes—unless otherwise noted—are taken from the New Evangelical Translation (GWN).
- xviii Ministerial Association. *Seventh Day Adventists Believe . . . A Biblical Exposition of 27 Fundamental Doctrines*. General Conference of Seventh Day Adventists, 6840 Eastern Avenue NW. Washington, DC 20012, p. 108.
- xix Koehler, p. 45.
- xx Koehler, p. 41.
- xxi Tournier, pp. 204,205.
- xxii Pieper, Vol. II, p. 6.
- xxiii Senkbeil, p. 49.