

Grace Alone

How can we have relationship with God?

Since God is the creator of all, the one to whom we owe our existence and to whom we will each give account, there is no issue more important than how we should relate rightly to him.

In the Protestant Reformation (16th century) men such as Martin Luther and John Calvin realized that traditional (Roman Catholic) understanding of salvation and the Christian life had strayed from what the Bible teaches. The subsequent struggle to reform church teachings and practice gave rise to 4 slogans: **Grace Alone, Christ Alone, Scripture Alone, and Faith Alone.**

These studies will examine the biblical basis and implications of each slogan. We will begin with “Grace Alone”.

Start your Thinking

What does the word “grace” mean to the average Aussie? How about “gracious”? How about the occasionally used expression “gratis”?

Bible Study

God speaks very clearly about what it means to be his people, and how this can come about. Each of the following passages talks in some way about how people come to have a right relationship with God. Try and answer the questions for each passage (not every question will be answered in every passage).

	Deuteronomy 7:6-8	Ephesians 2:1-10	Titus 3:3-7
What is the “natural” state of humanity before God?			
What did God do?			
What was done to deserve or merit God’s action?			

From these passages, how would explain to someone what it means that God saves us by “grace”?

Paul’s letter to the Galatians is written to Christians who have been told that in addition to faith in Christ, they must also keep Jewish laws (particularly circumcision). Read these short sections and rate (1-10) the seriousness of this issue for the apostle: Galatians 1:6-9, 2:15-16 & 2:20-2.

“Grace Alone”

At the time of the Reformation, the Bible’s teaching on salvation was summarized by two Latin words: *sola gratia* (“by grace alone”). It is really another way of saying that God is God - the sovereign, good and generous God. Ever since creation, the whole world has been dependent on God for all things. Our very existence is “by grace alone”. The universe did not bring itself into existence; nor did it do anything to deserve to be created. So it is with salvation. If someone asks you how you got right with God, the final answer must be “God did it” - not because we deserve it, but because of his grace.

In Roman Catholicism (as in all expressions of human religion) salvation is not by grace alone. In that system salvation is a process where we co-operate with God and seek to eventually be justified, and grace is a kind of power from God that helps us live the kind of life we need to live. This ‘grace’ comes to us as we participate in the sacraments of the church, and involves a human contribution. Under this system the focus inevitably falls on us, on the church, and on what we need to do.

By contrast the Bible is clear that we are saved by grace **alone**. On our own we are dead in sin, completely unable to respond to God. Our only hope is to be the recipient of the gracious initiative of God in achieving complete salvation for us in Christ.

The Reformers saw that not only does denying “grace alone” rob believers of “sweet, pleasant and unspeakable comfort” (Anglican Church Article 17 of the 39 Articles), it undermines the glory of the God who so graciously and wonderfully saves us.

Implications

In what way does salvation by grace alone humble us?

How might it comfort or reassure us?

What problems might flow from thinking that God requires some contribution from us?

How might we (in our attitudes, teaching or actions) be guilty of denying “grace alone”? (ie. How are we tempted to think or live as though people’s salvation depends on some human contribution or cooperation?)

How might understanding “grace alone” shape how we relate to other people?

What attitude do you think we should have towards people who think that salvation is dependent on some human contribution? What about towards those who teach other than Grace alone?

Pray together about what you’ve learnt.

Pray also for people you know who haven’t yet come to appreciate the truths expressed in these slogans – especially Roman Catholic Friends.

By Christ Alone

The message that rings through Scripture is that God has provided Jesus Christ as the unique, sufficient and abundant way of salvation. Christ is the one true mediator between God and humanity. He died on the cross as an atoning sacrifice for our sins to bring us to God. He is the perfect revelation of God. He is our great high priest and our once-for-all sacrifice. As a man he perfectly represents us in the presence of God, and as one in whom all the fullness of God dwells, he brings all of God to us. In Christ we have every spiritual blessing. Apart from Christ we are lost and without hope.

The Reformers saw the terrible deception and blasphemy of going beyond Christ or seeking alternate sources of grace. Their cry was *sola Christi* – by Christ alone! Against Roman Catholicism, they saw that “Christ Alone” implies that we have no need for human priests as mediators to hear our confessions and offer sacrifices on “altars”. In fact just to have these things implies something inadequate about Christ and his work for us. The Lord’s Supper is not a sacrifice (as in the “Mass”), but a simple meal proclaiming Christ’s work on the cross. Nor can we imagine that any other mediator could supplement Christ (eg. the pope as the representative of Christ on earth, the Church, Mary or special “saints”). Similarly the notions of penance, purgatory, and indulgences (ways of reducing the suffering of loved ones in purgatory) are profoundly unbiblical.

In our modern world however, “Christ Alone”, also challenges our thinking in another way. To many it seems narrow minded and arrogant for us to say that salvation is only found in Christ. However, we must remember that it is not our idea that God (in his great love and mercy) has chosen to offer salvation to us in Christ alone. Who are we to rise up and shake our fists at God for choosing to graciously drag us out of the pit in his own unique way?

Implications

How does the truth of “Christ Alone” comfort, confront, challenge or excite you?

How does understanding “Christ Alone” give us assurance of salvation?

In what ways might forgetting/rejecting “Christ Alone” show itself in our Christian life?

How should “Christ Alone” shape the ministry of our church? In particular how should it affect...

Our Evangelism?

Our Church Meetings?

Our Prayers?

Why do you think human religion so easily forgets/rejects the notion of “Christ Alone”?

What does “Christ alone” suggest about the search for God through other religions and nature?

4. Pray together about what you’ve learnt

Scripture Alone

How can we know Christ?

In the first two of these studies we have seen that God relates to us by “Grace Alone” in “Christ Alone”, but how/where do we find Christ? How can we know how to relate to him? What authority should rule us in establishing doctrine (what we believe) and ethics (how we should live)?

Start your Thinking

Rosie: “To me, God is the most logical thing in the world. When I look at everything around me, I’ve just got to conclude that there must be a good God up there who created it all and sets it all in motion. There’s no other reasonable explanation”

Bob: “Yes, I agree, but I think you need to take it further. Unless we have the Bible, we can’t know much about what this God is like. I think everything we know about God comes from the bible.”

Charlie: “Fair enough, but whose interpretation of the Bible do we trust? There are lots of different interpretations going around out there... I think we must listen to what the Church says is right.”

Emma: “I think you’re all getting too intellectual. Sure, you can read about God in the bible and see what he’s done in the world, but I know about God because I’ve had a personal experience of him. I mean, he’s so real to me that I feel as if I could reach out and touch him. Nobody can deny that.”

Each of these four approaches to the existence of God relies on a different source of authority. What authorities can you identify? What are the merits of each approach?

Bible Study

How did God relate to (rule/guide/save) people in Old Testament times? How were His people to respond?

Genesis 12:1-3
Deuteronomy 6:1-9 & 31:9-13
Isaiah 66:1-4

What about now in New Testament times? Read Matthew 28:16-20

What authority does Jesus claim? (On what basis can he claim this?)

How does Jesus understand that he will exercise his authority in the world?
(See how this works out in 1 Thessalonians 2:1-4, 2:13, 4:1-8)

What access do we now have to the teaching of the apostles (those sent by Jesus)?

What does this imply about Jesus, the New Testament and us?

What do we learn in these passages about the nature, purpose and authority of God’s Word written (i.e. ‘Scripture’)?

Psalms 19:7-11

2 Timothy 3:14-17

“Scripture Alone”

Prior to the Reformation (and still today) the Roman Church taught that its own traditions (official teachings) had authority alongside the Bible. Not only were these traditions considered to be binding on Christians, but they also functioned to control how people could interpret the Bible. In effect therefore, the church was not subject to the rule of God in Scripture. It was not open to critique and reform. Instead of God ruling the church by his word, the church ruled the Bible! Furthermore, ordinary Christians were not allowed to read the Bible for themselves – they needed to submit to what the church taught.

When men like Martin Luther challenged the Church to submit to what the Bible teaches, they were excommunicated and forced to start new churches. These ‘Protestant’ denominations saw that God forms and rules the church by his Word. Furthermore they saw that the Bible is powerful to save because it is God’s instrument to bring us to Christ and salvation in him. Men like William Tyndale died in the cause of translating and distributing the Bible to ordinary people. Against the claims and practices of the Roman Catholic Church, the Reformers cried “Scripture Alone”.

We should note however, that the Reformers did not cry “Nuda Scriptura”, as though no other authority exists. Their point was that Scripture alone rules as the supreme authority in all matters of faith. There are at least three other ‘authorities’, which shape how we think and live...

Bible	Tradition
Reason	Experience

It is foolish, arrogant and ultimately impossible for us to suppose that we can live with only the Bible as our guide. However, we must all decide who will rule our lives – Christ, ourselves or other human authorities? The Reformers saw that Bible is God’s written word, by which God himself addresses us. It must therefore reign supreme in our thinking and demands our trust and obedience. They also saw that experience can mislead, reason has its limitations, and the church can be in error. Only God’s word is true, unchanging and absolute. God’s Word therefore must critique and interpret all other authorities.

For Discussion

1. How should “Scripture Alone” affect the way we read and understand the Bible?
2. In the 16th century the big issue for Christians was the Bible v Church tradition. What do you think is the main alternative authority for us today? In what ways are you personally tempted to allow other authorities to take precedence over the Bible?
3. What are the limitations of each of the alternate authorities? Can you think of an example for each?
4. A Christian man is bored and miserable in his marriage. He is contemplating leaving his wife to move in with his secretary. As a Christian friend committed to “Scripture Alone” what would you say to him? If he were to resort to the alternate authorities, what arguments might you expect him to give in favour of his action?
5. How would people committed to each authority run a church meeting? What would be central/important in their meetings?
6. What practical life choices can you make to ensure that you are regularly reading/hearing and reflecting upon the word of God?

Pray together about what you’ve learnt

Faith Alone

So far in these studies we have seen that God relates to us by Grace Alone in Christ alone whom we know in Scripture alone, but what is our part? How do we receive what God offers us in Christ?

1. Discussion Starter

How do people generally understand and/or use the word “faith”? Does it have positive or negative connotations?

2. Bible Study

Read Romans 3:21-24.

How can we be justified? (Note: “Righteousness“ and “justified” are closely related. “Justified” means to be declared righteous, that is right with God the judge).

Read Romans 4:1-8 & 18-25

How was Abraham (and how will we be) justified? (The background is Genesis 15:1-6)

Is there any sense in which Abraham was rewarded for his faith?

What do we learn here about the nature of “faith”?

Eg. What synonyms could be used for it?
Is it just wishful thinking?
Is it something only some people can have?

Read Ephesians 2:4-10

How does God save us or bring us to life? What role does faith play?

Where do good works fit into the Christian life? Where do they not fit in?

3. Right with God through faith alone

Justification through “faith alone” was one of the key issues of the 16th century Protestant Reformation.

In Roman Catholic understanding, justification is a process where, after initially being forgiven through baptism, God helps us to become more righteous and eventually acceptable to him. To quote the Catechism of the Catholic Church (1993, Para 2019) “Justification includes the remission of sins, sanctification, and the renewal of the inner man”. In this thinking justification includes something God does in us, so that over time (through our cooperation) we might eventually become right with God. To use an everyday image - Jesus has opened the gates of heaven, now we must do our bit and go through.

The Reformers however, saw that the Bible teaches that justification is something God does for us. It is not a process, but a decisive declaration by God. God credits to us (as a free gift) a right standing with him. We receive this gift simply through faith – trusting God’s promise to save us on account of what Christ has done for us. This faith is not something that in any way merits salvation. Faith is simply trusting/relying/depending upon God to save us on account of Christ. Faith is an empty hand that receives God’s free gift. Beyond faith nothing else is required. There is nothing more we could possibly contribute towards our acceptance by God. God has done it all for us in Christ – we are justified by faith alone.

What then of God’s work in us? Certainly God does work in us to continually change us. However this is not the ground of our acceptance before God, it is the result. Furthermore true faith will inevitably be expressed in and therefore evidenced by good works (cf. James 2:14-25).

4. For Discussion

a) In light of what we’ve learnt in this study how would you respond to someone who says:

“I’m not sure if I’ll be accepted by God, because my faith is weak and wavering”

“What if I sin after I become a Christian?”

“God will accept me if I have enough faith”

“Faith is the inner ability to believe regardless of circumstances – and I just can’t do it”

b) How does understanding justification by faith alone make a difference to

Assurance of salvation (cf. Romans 5:1-2 & 9)

Christian Freedom (eg. from rules and rituals) (cf. Galatians 5:1-5)

Motives for Christian Living (cf. Romans 12:1-22)

An arrogant or self-righteous attitude (cf. Philippians 3:2-11)

c) Can you think of any ways we could imply (in teaching or practice) that we are not justified by faith alone.

5. Pray together about what you’ve learnt

A Different Approach...

This is a quote from the "World Youth Day" website.¹ It is the text of the granting of an indulgence to people who "devotedly take part in a ceremony carried out publicly in honour of the cross of world youth day", and an accompanying explanation. What aspects of this are consistent with, what goes beyond, and what is contrary to the Bible's teaching? Can you see anything different to the four slogans?

23rd May 2007

The APOSTOLIC PENITENTIARY, commissioned by the Supreme Pontiff, willingly grants the Plenary Indulgence under the usual conditions (Sacramental Confession, Holy Communion and Prayer for the Pope's Intentions) on the understanding that the requirements are duly fulfilled, and that the faithful are truly repentant, in accompanying the WYD CROSS on its journey through the countries of Oceania; this includes anyone who devotedly takes part in a sacred ceremony carried out publicly in honour of the CROSS of the "WORLD YOUTH DAY" solemnly exposed, or at least be attentive in the presence of this same CROSS by means of access in a public place either in a large crowd or alone, in a state of pious contemplation and prayer, including recitation of the Lord's Prayer and the Profession of Faith in a legitimate creedal formula, and also a prayerful invocation of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

This arrangement will be valid for this one occasion only... Anything to the contrary notwithstanding.

James Francis Cardinal Stafford (Major Penitentiary)
+John Francis Girotti, OFM Conv. (Regent)

What is a Plenary Indulgence?

Indulgences are particular expressions of the mercy of God, and are linked to the effects of the Sacrament of Penance.

The forgiveness of sins restores our communion with God, which is ruptured by serious sin. Unhealthy attachments developed by sins, great and small, require purification in this life or in the next. These the Church calls "temporal punishments due to sin."

This purification takes place through patient bearing of trials and sufferings through charitable and merciful acts, and through prayer.

The Church, as the minister of Christ's redemption, dispenses graces - including indulgences - from the treasury of the gifts given by Christ, through his death and resurrection, and makes them available to those seeking them with sincere heart.

Indulgences are not magical, like all graces they require the proper disposition to receive them. They certainly cannot be sold.

Like all gifts, material or spiritual, given by God, they are to be shared for the building of Christ body, whether on Earth, in purification on the way to Heaven, or in eternal happiness.

Those in Heaven don't need our help, but those in Purgatory do, so we can receive an indulgence for ourselves or for them. The saints in heaven, particularly Mary, the Mother of God, can be of great assistance to us.

Spiritual movements express themselves through physical actions. For the "Plenary" or full indulgence to be obtained, certain physical actions expressing or accompanying the right attitude are required. For the newly granted WYD indulgence to be received, people should:

- devotedly take part in a sacred ceremony carried out publicly in honour of WYD Cross solemnly exposed or at least be attentive in the presence of this cross by means of access in a public place either in a large crowd or alone;
- celebrate Sacrament of Penance (10 days before or after);
- receive Holy Communion (10 days before or after);
- pray for the Pope's intentions;
- recitation of Our Father, the Creed and prayerful invocation of the Blessed Virgin Mary (one Hail Mary).

Like the woman who touched Jesus' garment in faith, she was healed, as power went from him. Or like St Thomas who was invited to put his hand in the side of Christ and his fingers into the holes made by the nails, his unbelieving heart learnt to believe that Jesus was "Lord and God".

¹http://www.wyd2008.org/index.php/en/media__1/latest_news/news_archives/2007_news_archives/plenary_indulgence