

**The Five Solas of the Reformation Conference
Grace Bible Church of Olive Branch, MS**

Sola Gratia

Grace Alone

Brian Daniels

Pastor, Doty Chapel Baptist Church, Shannon, MS

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What is Sola Gratia?

Sola gratia is a Latin expression that means “grace alone.” Alongside other terms like *sola scriptura* (Scripture alone), *sola fide* (faith alone), *solus Christus* (Christ alone), and *solī Deo gloria* (to the glory of God alone), it is a way of summarizing what the Protestant Reformation was all about. The Reformers believed that our salvation is founded on God’s grace alone, and that nothing we do, no merits of our own, could ever contribute to our redemption from the bondage of sin.

Historical Context

On October 31, 1517 (as near we can tell), a young Augustinian monk in the town of Wittenberg in Saxony, Germany, posted a series of articles for academic debate at the door of the castle church. The monk’s name was Martin Luther. Five years earlier, in 1512, Martin had received a doctor’s degree from the new university in Wittenberg and was given a lifetime appointment as professor of Bible. The articles that he posted on that day are known more commonly as the *Ninety-Five Theses*, and their publication marks the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. Luther, however, couldn’t have known what would come from the events of that day, now almost five hundred years ago. His theses were intended to spark an academic debate among theological scholars in the tidy halls of a university, not to break the spiritual backbone of Western Christendom and create a rift in the church. They were penned originally in Latin, the language of scholarly discourse and study, and were therefore inaccessible to most people. Only later were they translated into the common tongue of German.

And yet the subject of the *Ninety-Five Theses* was profoundly important. This document set off a tumult because it began a process of dismantling the medieval church’s understanding of salvation. It touched a matter at the heart of the gospel—God’s grace. But why did Luther write this? What spurred him on to question the church’s teachings? What exactly was he doing?

The answer takes us into the heart of medieval politics and church life (the two could be very closely intertwined). A man named Albrecht, the archbishop of Brandenburg, petitioned the pope in Rome in an effort to secure a second archbishopric in Mainz. Holding more than one such post was against Roman church law, but the pope granted the request in exchange for a sizeable payment from Albrecht that would go toward the building of St. Peter’s church in Rome. Albrecht couldn’t pay it, so he borrowed the money from the Fugger banking family. In 1515, Pope Leo issued an indulgence that would be sold in Albrecht’s lands to pay off the debt. This is what drew Luther’s attention and led to the *Ninety-Five Theses*. Purchasing an indulgence was a way for people to bypass purgatory and ensure their quick entrance into heaven. For a set price, you could get forgiveness for your own sins or even for those of a dead

family member. Luther believed such things were a grave abuse, and he wrote his *Ninety-Five Theses* to combat the error.

The kind of thinking that is found in the *Theses* marked Luther's life from this point onward. Luther was a preacher of grace—he believed that we owe our salvation, our reconciliation with God, our justification, to an act of sheer and undeserved mercy. God's grace was an effectual grace; it accomplished infallibly to what God intended. Luther knew what it was to struggle for an assurance of salvation. His years in the monastery were characterized by doubts, fears of God's wrath, and fruitless struggles to secure God's favor. His discovery of grace in the pages of Scripture was fueled by a relentless quest to find an inner peace that could not be had by following the rituals of the Roman church.

What exactly Luther thought about his reforming work, and the theology of grace upon which it was built, can be found in a work he published in 1525. It was called *The Bondage of the Will* and was a response to Desiderius Erasmus's *Diatribes on Free Will*. Erasmus is widely regarded as perhaps the greatest scholar of his day, and his 1516 Greek New Testament had an enormous impact not only on Luther, but on greater Christendom as well. While Erasmus believed the church was greatly in need of reform, he did not go as far as Luther, particularly in the matter of God's grace and man's will. His *Diatribes* was specifically directed against Luther's views on this matter, and Erasmus's own position is summarized in his definition of the free will: "By freedom of the will we understand in this connection the power of the human will whereby man can apply to or turn away from that which leads unto eternal salvation."¹

It is important to understand that neither Erasmus nor the Roman church denied that grace was necessary in salvation—as Reformed apologist James White has pointed out, "The Reformation was never about the necessity of grace, but rather the sufficiency of grace"—but they did assign a significant role for the human will in the process, and this teaching Luther vehemently denied. For Luther, God's grace went beyond being just necessary; the grace of God alone should be credited with securing our salvation, even with guaranteeing our proper response of faith in Jesus Christ. Because of sin, the human will is no longer free in spiritual matters, but is under bondage and in need of God's efficacious grace to turn it in the right direction and to enable it to choose Christ. In fact, in Luther's mind, this was the key issue of the Reformation. He makes the following comment to Erasmus at the end of *The Bondage of the Will* regarding their debate on the will: "Moreover, I praise and commend you highly for this also, that unlike all the rest you alone have attacked the real issue, the essence of the matter in dispute, and have not wearied me with irrelevancies about the papacy, purgatory, indulgences, and such like trifles (for trifles they are rather than basic issues), with which almost everyone hitherto has gone hunting for me without success. You and you alone have seen the question on which everything hinges, and have aimed at the vital spot; for which I sincerely thank you,

¹ Desiderius Erasmus, "A Diatribe or Sermon Concerning Free Will," in *Erasmus and Luther: Discourse on Free Will* (trans. and ed. Ernst F. Winter; New York: Continuum, 2005), 17.

since I am only too glad to give as much attention to this subject as time and leisure permit.”² Thus Luther considered his Reformation to be a return to a proper and biblical theology of grace.

What Does the Bible Say?

The Bible is a book about grace from beginning to end. From God’s response to Adam and Eve’s fall in providing garments to cover their nakedness and in his promise that a Seed was coming who would destroy the works of the devil (Gen. 3:15), to God’s redemption of a people by a gracious covenant in which he promises to provide for them what they cannot provide for themselves (Jer. 31:31–34; cf. Eph. 1:3–14), to his redemption of the cosmos in the establishment of a new heavens and a new earth (Isa. 65:17; 66:22; 2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1–5), God’s grace is writ large in the pages of Scripture.

Some Important Biblical Passages:

“Then the LORD passed by in front of him and proclaimed, ‘The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations’” (Exod. 34:6–7).³

“In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God’s gracious choice. But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace” (Rom. 11:5–6).

“But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me” (1 Cor. 15:10).

“For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus, who gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds” (Titus 2:11–14).

Ephesians 2:1-10: What can we learn about God’s grace?

1. Grace is a response (2:1–3).
2. Grace has a source (2:4–7).
3. Grace is a gift (2:8–9).
4. Grace has a purpose (2:10).

² Martin Luther, “The Bondage of the Will,” in *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings* (3d ed.; ed. Timothy F. Lull and William R. Russell; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 169.

³ Scripture quotations taken from the NASB.

For Further Study:

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