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# Luther and 'sola gratia': The Rapport Between Grace, Human Freedom, Good Works and Moral Life

*Lutero y la 'sola gratia': La relación entre gracia, libertad, buenas obras y vida moral*

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**Resumen:** Para Lutero, Dios es el centro del universo, ante quien el mundo creado es prácticamente nada. Por esta razón usa el término «*sola*» para expresar lo que tiene sus raíces en la acción de Dios: *sola gratia, sola fide, sola Scriptura, solus Christus*. Este estudio trata del principio de *sola gratia* de Lutero en su relación con la libertad y la respuesta humana. Según la teología luterana, los hombres no responden a la gracia «devolviendo» algo a Dios, sino siendo agradecidos con Él por los dones recibidos. La gratitud se concreta en el esfuerzo para conocer y aceptar la acción interior de los dones divinos (creación, gracia, etc), aunque este agradecimiento podría ser considerado una auténtica acción humana que el hombre puede no querer realizar. La gracia no sólo proporciona la fuerza para realizar la voluntad de Dios, sino que en un nivel más profundo sana la ingratitud pecaminosa del hombre y le lleva a buscar y a seguir libremente la voluntad de Dios en todo, también en el descubrimiento del don de la naturaleza con que Dios nos ha dotado.

**Palabras clave:** Lutero, *sola gratia*, Libertad.

**Abstract:** For Luther God is the center of the universe, before whom the created world is as nothing. That is why he uses the term «*sola*», 'alone', to express what has its roots in God's action: *sola gratia, sola fide, sola Scriptura, solus Christus*. In this study we have considered the principle of *sola gratia*, in the context of its relationship to human freedom and response to grace. According to Lutheran theology humans respond to grace not by 'giving' anything back to God but by being grateful to him for the gifts received. Yet this may be considered a truly human action, which we can refuse to carry out. Gratitude is made concrete in the effort humans make to know and understand and listen to and accept the inner workings of divine gifts (creation, grace, etc.). Thus grace not only provides strength to fulfill God's will, but at a more profound level heals the sinful ingratitude of humans and brings them to freely seek out and follow God's will in everything, also by coming to know the gift of nature he has provided us with.

**Keywords:** Luther, *sola gratia*, Human Freedom.

## 1. GOD AS CENTER IN LUTHER'S THEOLOGY AND THE MEANING OF 'SOLA'

*Sola gratia, sola fide, sola Scriptura, solus Christus*: 'grace alone', 'faith alone', 'Scripture alone', 'Christ alone', as we know, are among the key principles of Lutheran theology. And Martin Luther was, if anything, a man of principle. Some of his principles and positions might not hold up nowadays<sup>1</sup>, but the basic one would and should: that God is the beginning and end of all things. This was his great, enduring intuition, his life-long vision, his all-encompassing passion. This is what gives perennial value to his life and teachings. Pope Benedict XVI, during his 2011 visit to Erfurt, Germany, stated: «What constantly exercised [Luther] was the question of God, the deep passion and driving force of his whole life's journey»<sup>2</sup>. Before God, *coram Deo*, the world and all it contains – indeed the entire universe – is as nothing, according to Luther. God alone is God. And when Luther uses the word *solus* or *sola* ('alone'), that is what he is referring to: God is the sole point of reference for everything else that exists.

*Ut mecum sit, tamen Deus est Deus*, he says, «whatever may become of me, God is still God»<sup>3</sup>. Being saved, being cared for *by God*, is a life and death issue for Luther, not a secondary one: «It is about your neck, it is about your life»<sup>4</sup>, he says. Hans-Martin Barth writes that «What the word of God says emerges from the fourfold 'alone' of the reformational approach: faith alone, resting on grace alone, as it is given solely in Jesus Christ and attested only in Sacred Scripture»<sup>5</sup>. And as a result: «Those who occupy themselves with Luther get to the center of Christian theology»<sup>6</sup>. Luther strove to establish a theology directed always towards «the glory of God and salvation of humans»<sup>7</sup>.

And Gerhard Ebeling writes that Luther's 'alone' (grace alone, faith alone, etc.) «takes on a fundamental theological significance, that is, that in everything that is said about God, it must be remembered that *it is God who*

<sup>1</sup> For example the question of Anti-Semitism, opposition to Islam, his treatment of the rebels during the Peasants' War in 1525, his attitude towards witchcraft and demonology. On these issues, cfr. BARTH, H.-M., *The Theology of Martin Luther: A Critical Assessment*, Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013, 29-74.

<sup>2</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Address to the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany*, 23-IX-2011.

<sup>3</sup> LUTHER, M., *Dr. Martin Luthers Werke*, Weimar: H. Böhlau Nachfolger (abbrev. WA), 1883-2000, 17/1, 81.

<sup>4</sup> LUTHER, M., WA 10/1/2, 335.

<sup>5</sup> BARTH, H.-M., *Theology of Martin Luther*, 283.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

*speaks...* and whatever does not let God be God must be excluded»<sup>8</sup>. According to Philip Watson, for Luther theology means that we must always «let God be God»<sup>9</sup>.

Could it not happen, however, that the preponderance of God's action would displace the reality of the creature? Is human freedom meaningful before God? In his 1525 work *De servo arbitrio* Luther was of the opinion that, when faced with the active power of God, humans are liberated, indeed, but their free will is but a 'mere word'<sup>10</sup>, because they are simply incapable of collaborating or 'cooperating' with God. For Luther, human action is not compatible or commensurate with divine action, and because God is sovereign and creator, his action is paramount, unalloyed with creaturely activity. Thus, it would seem, the human is not meaningfully free with respect to the divine. The *sola* of God pairs off with the *nihil* of the creature.

The Catholic approach to the relationship between God and creature is somewhat different. The normal response to the questions just asked would be vouched for in non-dialectic terms, with the expression «et» – «et» [«and» – «and»], in contrast with the more Protestant «aut» – «aut» [«either» – «or»]. God *and* man, Catholics would say, grace *and* freedom, calling *and* response. Catholic theology and spirituality on the whole attempts to be affirmative, positive and inclusive, for it excludes nothing, neither God nor man, neither grace nor freedom<sup>11</sup>. Protestants however prefer the «exclusive either – or»<sup>12</sup>. By way of example of the *dialectic* «aut» – «aut» principle, Luther says that «There is no middle kingdom between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan»<sup>13</sup>, for God's kingdom excludes the devil's, and vice versa. Speaking of the 'theology of the Cross', or *theologia crucis*, central to Luther's theology, Hubertus Blaumeiser says that «Luther opened our eyes to the

<sup>8</sup> EBELING, G., *Luther: Einführung in sein Denken*, Tübingen: Mohr, 1964, 285.

<sup>9</sup> Cfr. WATSON, P. S., *Let God be God: an Interpretation of the Theology of Martin Luther*, London: Epworth Press, 1947.

<sup>10</sup> Cfr. LUTHER, M., *De Servo Arbitrio*, WA 18, 709, and also LUTHER, M., *Heidelberg Disputation*, thesis 13, WA 1, 354.

<sup>11</sup> Cfr. O'CALLAGHAN, P., *Children of God in the World. An Introduction to Theological Anthropology*, Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2016, 340-374, 442-471. Cfr. also BARRO, R., *Vibrant Paradoxes: the both/and of Catholicism*, Skokie, Illinois: Word on Fire, 2016. The issue involves what in theology is called 'compatibilism': cfr. McCABE, H., *God Matters*, London: Continuum, 2005.

<sup>12</sup> BARTH, H.-M., *Theology of Martin Luther*, 4, who cites BAUR, J., *Luther und seine klassischen Erben*, Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1993, 8.

<sup>13</sup> LUTHER, M., WA 18, 743.

cross, in all its severity, and this involves a consequent non-being (*aut – aut*) that always remains inscribed in the mutual relationship of God and human beings (*et – et*), but it is not simply a nothingness; it is the verso of a new being that is given ever anew by God»<sup>14</sup>.

But it is fair to recognize that a real problem can arise with the Catholic «*et*» – «*et*» once we say that divine action and human action are simply incommensurate with one another. God's self-giving cannot be 'added' to human reception or cooperation, nor can God's grace be combined with the performance of human works, as if the final result might be the sum total of the action of Creator and creature, as if God 'contributed' 90%, allowing humans to chip in 10%; or maybe with God giving 75% and humans the rest. Sometimes we say 'God helps those who help themselves', but this is Greek, not Christian. Euripides said as much: «Try first thyself, and after call in God; For to the worker God himself lends aid»<sup>15</sup>.

The fact is however that there is *no comparison* between God's action and that of the creature at an ontological level. Commensurability works only between creatures that belong to like species. To put God and man on the same plane is unacceptable. Two people can push a cart and make it move, and their energies are added one to another in producing a single effect. A man and a woman can get married and form a family. Different institutions within society can pull together for the common good. Nations can cooperate for political or economic ends. But God does not 'cooperate' with the creature in the strict sense of the word. God's operation simply cannot be compared with human operation, to be added to or subtracted from it. When speaking of divine and human action it is more correct to apply the rule of alternatives, «*aut*» – «*aut*», 'either – or', for the creature can never occupy the place of the Creator.

And here lies one of the most fundamental intuitions of Luther. It is not that other Christians before and after him did not have the same conviction. Still, on account of its clarity it may be considered as one of his lasting contributions. Only God is God: anything or anybody that attempts to occupy his place commits idolatry and incurs the wrath of the prophets, the reprimand of the Baptist, and the lament of Jesus (Lk 13:34). Thus Luther spoke of defen-

<sup>14</sup> BLAUMEISER, H., *Martin Luthers Kreuzestheologie: Schlüssel zu seiner Deutung von Mensch und Wirklichkeit*, Paderborn: Bonifatius, 1995, 550.

<sup>15</sup> EURIPIDES, frag. 435.

ding 'the Godhead of God'. «You will have to let God be God», he wrote in his 1519 sermon *Preparing to Die*<sup>16</sup>. «What does the one who hopes in God come to, if not to his own nothingness?»<sup>17</sup>.

There is an extraordinary concreteness and directness in Luther's language about God. It is not a doctrine so much as a description, a proclamation, of *God's action*: of God calling us to life, judging and forgiving us, taking us back to himself<sup>18</sup>. «God's being is to act», writes Bellini, summing up Luther, «to give and not to receive, insofar as God cannot be given anything that is not already his; his is to place wisdom where wisdom is not to be found, to put justice where there is no justice, salvation where there is none»<sup>19</sup>. This brings Luther to pay attention not so much to divine 'attributes', but rather to God's active omnipotence and all-sufficiency, to his will and absolute freedom. God is «an energetic power, a continuous activity, that works and operates without ceasing. For God does not rest, but works unceasingly»<sup>20</sup>. After all, God «is present everywhere, in death, in hell, in the midst of our foes, yes, also in their hearts. For He has created all things, and He also governs them, and they must all do as He will»<sup>21</sup>. God is the ultimate protagonist of the universe: God is the most real of all beings. Before God, *coram Deo*, all creatures fade into irrelevance and nothingness.

Let us apply this reflection to the Lutheran principle of *sola gratia*, 'grace alone'.

## 2. THE PAULINE, AUGUSTINIAN AND MEDIEVAL ROOTS OF *SOLA GRATIA*

When Christians say they are saved *sola gratia*, 'by grace alone', they mean that salvation takes place exclusively by means of God's work, action, and intervention. Put another way, salvation does not depend on our works, our good deeds, our noble strivings. We simply cannot *earn* salvation. Neither can anyone else deserve it for us. It is entirely and exclusively God's gift. In the 1999 *Joint Declaration on Justification* agreed by Lutherans and Catho-

<sup>16</sup> LUTHER, M., *Preparing to Die*, WA 2, 690.

<sup>17</sup> LUTHER, M., *Operationes in Psalmos*, WA 5, 168.

<sup>18</sup> Cfr. LOHSE, B., *Martin Luther's Theology. Its Historical and Systematic Development*, Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011, 209.

<sup>19</sup> BELLINI, A., «La giustificazione per la sola fede», *Communio* (ed. italiana) 7 (1978) 30-73, here 34.

<sup>20</sup> LUTHER, M., WA 7, 574.

<sup>21</sup> LUTHER, M., *Lectures on Jonab*, WA 19, 219.

lics, we read: «By grace alone, in faith in Christ's saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works»<sup>22</sup>.

*Sola gratia* is Lutheran but also Augustinian and ultimately Pauline. Augustine said that «All of us, when we pray, are simply God's beggars»<sup>23</sup>. And among Luther's last words the same message is to be found: *Wir sein Pettler. Hoc est Verum*, 'we are beggars, this is true'<sup>24</sup>. It would be misleading to say we are saved by 'grace *and* works', as if each one contributed an equal or similar part to the process of salvation, perhaps a bit more on the grace side, a bit less on the works side, as if our own good deeds had the inner power of bringing us close to God. This is not in keeping with the teaching of Paul. We are saved by grace or not at all. «Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus» (Rom 3:23f.). This is what Luther means by the expression *sola gratia*.

One of the best known axioms of the late Middle Ages reads as follows: *Facienti quod est in se, Deus non denegat gratiam*, which may be translated thus: 'God does not deny his grace as long as man does his part'<sup>25</sup>. It would seem to be saying simply that God gives us the grace we do our best to deserve, 'God helps those who help themselves', in other words. But Luther realized that this understanding was wrong-headed and anthropomorphic, at least semi-Pelagian, and thus substantially unfaithful to the Gospel. In one's better moments it would constitute a source of complacency and sterile self-contemplation for believers; in weaker moments, moments of sin and temptation, it would become a source of anguish and scruples, which was Luther's own experience. Of the axiom *facienti quod est in se*, Luther wrote: «Whether they do their part or not, all should despair of themselves and put their trust only in God»<sup>26</sup>.

<sup>22</sup> LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION – CATHOLIC CHURCH, *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (31-X-1999), 15.

<sup>23</sup> AUGUSTINE, *Sermon* 83, 2.

<sup>24</sup> LUTHER, M., *WA Tischreden* 4, 491.

<sup>25</sup> On this axiom, cfr. RIVIÈRE, J., «Quelques antécédents patristiques de la formule: "facienti quod est in se"», *Revue des sciences religieuses* 7 (1927) 93-97; OBERMAN, H. A., «"Facientibus quod est in se est Deus non denegat gratiam". Robert Holcot O.P. and the Beginnings of Luther's Theology», *Harvard Theological Review* 55 (1962) 317-341.

<sup>26</sup> LUTHER, M., *Ad Gal. Comm.*, WA 2, 539.

Perhaps the best-known text of Luther on the matter is the fascinating autobiographical sketch describing the so-called 'Tower Experience', in his 1545 *Preface to Latin Works*. It reads as follows:

I greatly longed to understand Paul's Epistle to the Romans and nothing stood in the way but that one expression, *iustitia Dei*, 'the justice of God' [Rom 1:17], because I took it to refer to that justice whereby God is just and deals justly in punishing the unjust. My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would please him. Therefore I did not love a just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against him. Yet I clung to dear Paul and had a great yearning to know what he meant... Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that 'the just shall live by faith' (Rom 1:17). Then I grasped that *the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith*. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the 'justice of God' had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. The passage of Paul became a gate to heaven<sup>27</sup>.

When we say that God 'justifies' believers, we affirm primarily that God makes them just, not so much that God measures the worthiness of their actions and judges them accordingly for reward or punishment. Divine justice for Luther, we just saw, is «that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith». Thus the justice of God is not so much an *attribute* that God applies to humans, but primarily an *action*, a divine action which *makes* believers just.

### 3. GRACE ALONE, GOOD WORKS AND HUMAN SINFULNESS

The problem that arises here, of course, is that the preponderance of grace seems to eliminate the reality of human free will and the need for good works: God does everything, or so it seems, and humans nothing. Just as God's justice is active and not judgmental (as we would say nowadays), the human

<sup>27</sup> LUTHER, M., *Praef. Latin Works*, WA 54, 185f. Emphasis added.

will, so it seems, is passive and needs to make no effort. Luther seems to move in this direction in his profound and powerful 1525 essay *De servo arbitrio*, in polemics with Erasmus of Rotterdam<sup>28</sup>. In his final commentary on Galatians he sums up his position:

We teach that all men are wicked, we condemn all free will (*liberum arbitrium*), human strength, wisdom and justice in man, all willful religion, and everything that is good in the world. In short, we say that there is absolutely nothing in us sufficient to merit grace and the remission of sins, but we preach that this grace and this pardon can be obtained by the pure, unique mercy of God alone<sup>29</sup>.

So how do humans act as they receive grace? Is it a purely passive process? Is there no active human involvement whatever? Is there such thing as 'good works'?

Luther perceives that human activity is deeply infected by sin and egoism. He says:

Before everything else, man loves himself, he seeks himself in everything he does, he loves everything for himself, even when he loves a neighbor or friend, because in the other he seeks only the things that concern him<sup>30</sup>... Our nature by the effect of the first sin is so deeply folded in on itself (*in seipsam incurva*), that not only does it twist towards itself the best of God's gifts, drawing advantage from them... but it uses God to obtain those gifts, and is unaware it is seeking all things, even God, for himself, in a manner so iniquitous, tortuous and perverse... To love God for his gifts and for self-comfort is to love him with depraved love, that is, by concupiscence. This means using God, not taking our complacency in him<sup>31</sup>.

Yet Luther's position here is not so much ambivalent as dialectical. He openly follows the position of Augustine<sup>32</sup>, according to whom humans in

<sup>28</sup> On Luther's *De Servo Arbitrio*, see BRANTSCHEN, J., «De Servo oder de Libero Arbitrio: Luther und Thomas im Gespräch», *Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie* 13 (1966) 239-258; MCSORLEY, H. J., *Luther: Right or Wrong?: an Ecumenical-Theological Study of Luther's Major Work «The Bondage of the Will»*, Newman-New York: Augsburg-Minneapolis, 1969; MATEO-SECO, L. F., *M. Lutero. Sobre la libertad esclava*, Madrid: Emesa, 1978.

<sup>29</sup> LUTHER, M., *Comm. in Gal.*, WA 40/1, 121.

<sup>30</sup> LUTHER, M., *In Rom.*, WA 56, 482.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 304, 307.

<sup>32</sup> Cfr. O'CALLAGHAN, P., *Children of God*, 162f.



some ways sin in all their actions when grace is absent. The latter says: *nemo habet de suo nisi mendacium et peccatum*<sup>33</sup>, «nobody has anything of their own that is not lying and sin». Yet whereas Augustine attributes this to *cupiditas*, that is, to vanity and human pride, Luther goes further back and says it is due to a lack of faith. In his early *Commentary on Romans* we read: «Everyone without faith, even if he behaves well, sins... not because he acts against his conscience, but because he does not act out of faith: that is why he sins... because the defect of faith always remains»<sup>34</sup>. In his 1517 *Disputation against Scholastic Theology* he taught that the unjustified can only will and perform evil<sup>35</sup>. In the *Heidelberg Disputation* the following year he made the following famous declaration: «free will after sin is a mere title, and when it does what is in its power, it sins mortally»<sup>36</sup>. The same position is consolidated some years later in *De Servo Arbitrio*, which even seems to attribute human evil to God himself: *Deus operatur et mala opera in impiis*<sup>37</sup>, 'God carries out the evil works of sinners'. Strange though it may seem, Luther in other writings from the same period says that believers cannot sin no matter how they behave, as long as they do not renounce faith<sup>38</sup>. But his position is consistent: all actions performed outside faith are sinful. He confirmed it later on in the 1537 *Smalcald Articles*: «once the Spirit and the pardon of sins has been received, or once one has become a believer, one perseveres in the faith even when sinning afterwards, so that such a sin harms them no longer»<sup>39</sup>.

All in all, this view of human action and sinfulness reflects the living and existential dialectic at the heart of Luther's teaching: in human beings nature and sin are difficult to distinguish from one another. In human beings there is a *peccatum in substantia*, a radical sin, *cordis peccatum occultissimum*, «a deeply hidden sin in the heart»<sup>40</sup>, an «overall corruption of nature in all its members»<sup>41</sup>. Man is constitutionally a sinner in such a way that *faciens quod est in se*, precisely doing whatever he is capable of doing, he sins, and sins gravely. In

<sup>33</sup> AUGUSTINE, *In Io. Ev. tract.* 5,1.

<sup>34</sup> LUTHER, M., *In Rom.*, WA 56, 237.

<sup>35</sup> LUTHER, M., *Disputation against Scholastic Theology*, thesis 4, WA 1, 224.

<sup>36</sup> LUTHER, M., *Heidelberg Disputation*, thesis 13, WA 1, 354.

<sup>37</sup> LUTHER, M., *De Servo Arbitrio*, WA 18, 709. This position is taken within Luther's development of the doctrine of divine providence.

<sup>38</sup> Cfr. LUTHER, M., *De Captivitate Babylonica Ecclesiae*, WA 6, 529.

<sup>39</sup> LUTHER, M., *Artic. Smalcaldae III*, 3, WA 50, 225f.

<sup>40</sup> LUTHER, M., *Rationis Latomianae confutatio*, WA 8, 105.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

*De servo arbitrio* he explains that man is like a donkey: if God mounts it, he brings it where he wills; if the devil is in charge, he draws it towards evil. Humans seem to play little or no part in this process<sup>42</sup>.

So we return to question: what place do works – good works – occupy in the life of the believer? Is there such a thing as ‘good works’ in the first place? According to Luther, there is. But good works spring spontaneously from faith, he says, they are «its fruit and outcome»<sup>43</sup>. In fact «if works do not follow on [from faith], it is certain that faith in Christ does not reside in our heart, but is dead... Works are necessary for salvation, but do not cause salvation, because only faith gives life... Works are a necessary effect in the Christian, who is already saved in faith and hope, and nonetheless tends in this hope to reveal salvation»<sup>44</sup>.

Justification has two dimensions to it, Luther says helpfully, «faith before God, and works before the world»<sup>45</sup>, the latter being a manifestation and confirmation of the former. He went so far as speaking of faith ‘growing fat’ by works as it made its presence felt in man’s life<sup>46</sup>. And another surprising statement: «works save us externally, that is, they testify to our being just and that faith, which is what saves us from within, is present in man... External salvation shows up the good tree, as its fruit; it shows there is faith»<sup>47</sup>. And likewise: «When I have this righteousness within me, I descend from heaven like the rain that makes the earth fertile. That is, I come forth into another kingdom, and I perform good works whenever the opportunity arises»<sup>48</sup>. Good works in other words are the direct fruit of faith in the Christian.

#### 4. THE CONSISTENCY OF ‘GOOD WORKS’ AND HUMAN FREEDOM

But if good works are the direct result of God’s gift of faith and grace, then it would seem they should be considered simply as *God’s works* in believers, but not as the believer’s *own works*. We should keep in mind however that Luther has an ‘actualistic’ view of God’s grace working in and through hu-

<sup>42</sup> Cf. LUTHER, M., *De Servo Arbitrio*, WA 18, 635.

<sup>43</sup> LUTHER, M., *Rationis Latomianae confutatio*, WA 8, 107.

<sup>44</sup> LUTHER, M., *Thesen de fide*, n. 30, WA 39/1, 44.

<sup>45</sup> LUTHER, M., WA 39/1, 254.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. LUTHER, M., *De loco iustificationis*, WA 30/2, 659.

<sup>47</sup> LUTHER, M., *Comm. in Gal.*, WA 40/1, 96.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

mans. That is to say, God acts in and through believers, without giving them a stable capacity to act in a divine way (what in Catholic theology is often referred to as 'created grace')<sup>49</sup>. He simply avoids the notion of grace in any way interacting with human substance, with human nature. He just does not get involved in the issue. Rudolf Hermann acutely observes that Luther did not «fight against works... but against the presentability of works before God»<sup>50</sup>, against a desire to put ourselves in good order autonomously in the presence of God. And Alberto Bellini explains it as follows:

When the Reform affirms that sanctification follows on necessarily from justification, or, as Calvin teaches explicitly, that sanctification is a part of justification, in such a way that the latter cannot be said to exist without the former, it does not intend to speak of a sanctification of man in his being, an *ontological sanctification*, as Catholic theology would have it, but rather a *moral sanctification*. In other words, man under God's grace, in whom Christ lives, alongside the divine declaration that he is just, must also perform works of justice, which would provide, as it were, a sign of the grace of God over him and of Christ present in him with his Spirit who has begun to renew man, and also a sign of that new and future life to which every man has been destined by God<sup>51</sup>.

The problem of course with this way of explaining moral action (good works resulting from faith and from God's direct intervention in the life of believers) is that it seems to bypass the creature and/or make its proper life irrelevant. To all appearances it runs roughshod over human faculties and nature. The exercise of free will would seem to be reserved only to the created world, to human activity in the world and to other persons, one's fellow creatures. Before God, we are but slaves. Addressing Erasmus of Rotterdam Luther says: «You are no doubt right in assigning to man a will of some sort, but to credit him with *a will that is free in the things of God* is too much»<sup>52</sup>. Before other creatures we choose, intelligently weighing up the pros and the cons. But before God we do not choose freely, Luther would hold, we just allow ourselves be

<sup>49</sup> On 'created grace', cfr. O'CALLAGHAN, P., *Children of God*, 278-300.

<sup>50</sup> HERMANN, R., *Willensfreiheit und gute Werke im Sinne der Reformation*, in *Gesammelte Studien zur Theologie Luthers und der Reformation*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1960, 44-76, here 64.

<sup>51</sup> BELLINI, A., *La giustificazione per la sola fede*, 69.

<sup>52</sup> LUTHER, M., WA 18, 661. Emphasis added.

brought along, whether we like it or not. After all, faith works *in nobis et sine nobis*, «in us but without us»<sup>53</sup>. Clearly, this view could conceivably give rise to a secularized understanding of human freedom, intimately tied up with the world and unconnected with the Creator, and thus a morality of complete autonomy.

## 5. HUMAN RESPONSE TO GOD'S GRACE AS GRATITUDE

But what explanation could be given within the framework of Luther's theology to justify the idea that humans can offer a meaningful response to God's grace? He speaks quite openly, for example, about the existence of hell. In keeping with the medieval mystical *resignatio ad infernum*, or Christian 'readiness to endure hell', he seems to hold that we should be prepared to accept eternal condemnation if God so wills it<sup>54</sup>. Yet he consistently excludes any form of cooperation or merit in the believer's relationship with God. After all, divine action is simply incommensurate with human action.

It is true of course that we experience our actions as choices<sup>55</sup>. We are not completely free in choosing because we are inclined in one way or another by our passions, habits and culture. Yet we are conscious of not being fully determined when we act, that we are able to choose consciously, freely, relevantly. Many modern scientific anthropologies do hold that we are completely determined or programmed in the way we behave<sup>56</sup>, but this does not correspond to normal human experience, nor would it be in keeping with a sense of moral responsibility philosophers and moralists commonly hold.

Still, it is true that, when we act, our choice is not just between two (or more) concrete things, or actions, but between two different planes, two different modes of action, two alternative intentionalities<sup>57</sup>. The first consists of taking the world around us, the circumstances we live in and options we are presented with, *as a reality that is simply at our disposal*, which we can use and dominate and even destroy at our whim. This gives rise to self-idolizing, sinful behavior. The second involves taking the world and all the possibilities that present themselves to us *as gifts of God*, as opportunities afforded us by the Creator to recognize and accept and use his gifts. With the former there is non-faith,

<sup>53</sup> LUTHER, M., WA 6, 530.

<sup>54</sup> Cfr. LOHSE, B., *Martin Luther's Theology*, 77.

<sup>55</sup> Cfr. O'CALLAGHAN, P., *Children of God*, 444f.

<sup>56</sup> Cfr. *ibid.*, 452-454.

<sup>57</sup> Cfr. *ibid.*, 461-468.

closure to the Giver, sin; with the latter faith, openness to the Creator, holiness. With the former there is no union with God, but only individualistic or narcissistic identification with one's own projects, acting as if God did not exist; with the latter there is conscious and grateful union with and submission to the divine. With the former there is a rejection of gift and a personal diminution; with the latter, a grateful acceptance and consequent personal enrichment.

On no account can we *give* anything to God: God is the only one who gives in a completely original, unsullied way. Luther holds firmly to this principle<sup>58</sup>. But creatures do *receive* from God and are meant to accept his gifts gratefully. And of course we can *reject* what we are given, and in doing so we sin; we are in principle capable of blocking the flow of God's giving and grace, we can stop believing in the living reality of the divinity. Interestingly, a 1535 catechism prepared by the Lutheran theologian Johannes Brenz asks the question: why should we perform good works? And he replies as follows: «Not because we pay for sin and earn eternal life with our deeds – for Christ alone has paid for sin and earned eternal life – but rather because we ought to bear witness to our faith with good works and *be thankful to our Lord God* for his good deeds»<sup>59</sup>.

The *Heidelberg Catechism*, prepared some twenty years after the death of Luther by his followers as a teaching resource for preaching and instruction<sup>60</sup>, follows this line and insists that the essence of moral life is to be found in *thankfulness* to God, that is recognition of all his gifts. To the question 'why do good works?', the *Catechism* responds: «Because Christ, having redeemed us by his blood, is also restoring us by his Spirit into his image, so that with our whole lives we may show that we are thankful to God for his benefits, so that he may be praised through us, so that we may be assured of our faith by its fruits, and so that by our godly living our neighbors may be won over to Christ»<sup>61</sup>. And elsewhere it asks: why should we pray? And the reply: «Because prayer is the most important part of the thankfulness God requires of us.

<sup>58</sup> On the notion of gift and grace in Luther, cfr. BARCLAY, J. M. G., *Paul and the Gift*, Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2015, 97-116.

<sup>59</sup> WEISMANN, Ch. (ed.), *Eine Kleine Biblia: Die Katechismen von Luther und Brenz*, Stuttgart: Calwer, 1985, 114, cit. by BIERMA, L. D., *The Theology of the Heidelberg Catechism. A Reformation Synthesis*, Westminster-Louisville: John Knox Press-Kentucky, 2013, 26. See all of chapter 13 of this work, entitled «Good works and gratitude», 101-115. Emphasis added.

<sup>60</sup> Cfr. BIERMA, L. D., *The Theology of the Heidelberg Catechism*.

<sup>61</sup> *Heidelberg Catechism*, n. 86, cit. in BIERMA, L. D., *The Theology of the Heidelberg Catechism*, 101.

And also because God gives his grace and Holy Spirit only to those who pray continually and groan inwardly, asking God for these gifts and thanking God for them»<sup>62</sup>. Union with Christ and faith, therefore, produce good works of gratitude, as the same *Catechism* says: «It is impossible for those grafted into Christ through true faith not to produce fruits of gratitude»<sup>63</sup>. Interesting the observation of Jürgen Moltmann: «The person who is freed from the compulsion to perform good works brims over with love, and does every good work spontaneously and unprompted, out of pure thankfulness, as the Heidelberg Catechism says»<sup>64</sup>. That is, grace produces free, grateful actions in believers. In this way it may be possible to hold that believers, while fully accepting the primacy and preponderance of grace, can respond truly to it, and really carry out good works.

This same centrality of gratitude as a fundamental Christian attitude before divine grace may be found in both Calvin<sup>65</sup> and Melancthon. The latter links thankfulness and obligation: we should realize that God ‘demands’ (*fordert*) thankfulness of us because «thankfulness comprises two great virtues, truth and justice. Truth professes where a benefit comes from; justice, on the other hand, obliges you to serve the benefactor»<sup>66</sup>. The reformed theologian Zacharias Ursinus confirms this in his lectures on the *Heidelberg Catechism*: «The Decalogue belongs to the first part, in as far as it is the mirror through which we are brought to see ourselves, and thus led to a knowledge of our sins and misery, and to the third part in as far as it is the rule of true thankfulness and of a Christian life»<sup>67</sup>.

## 6. GRATITUDE AND NATURAL LAW: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GOSPEL AND LAW

But might it not be that a consistently grateful spirit becomes indifferent to the specific *moral content* of human action? Might it not happen that otherwise grateful believers fall into a morality of intentions that pays no

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>63</sup> *Heidelberg Catechism*, n. 64.

<sup>64</sup> MOLTSMANN, J., *God for a Secular Society*, 194.

<sup>65</sup> See GERRISH, B. A., *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin*, Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993, especially 86, 123, 156.

<sup>66</sup> MELANCHTHON, P., *Examen ordinandorum* (1552), 224.

<sup>67</sup> URSINUS, Z., *Commentary*, 14.

attention to objective moral content? 'Be grateful to God and do as you will', we might say, paraphrasing Augustine's 'Love God and do as you will'. Doubtless, from the point of view of faith, the range of possibilities opened by a centering of moral action on freedom, gratitude and praise is enormous. But it would seem to allow each and every individual to decide for himself what is right and wrong... as long as he acts with faith and gratitude, that is with an upright Christian intention. There would be no necessary link-up with a moral law, common to all and rooted in human nature. In that case, what would happen to the Decalogue, to the ten commandments? This brings us to consider the classic Lutheran opposition between *Gospel* and *Law*.

When it comes to knowing how God wants us to act, thus showing gratitude towards him, we can study how things behave, how they work, what they tend to do... what we normally call the natural law<sup>68</sup>. Lohse observes that for Luther «it was not the law that was altered after the fall, but rather humankind»<sup>69</sup>. Luther himself remarks: «Indeed, all by nature have a certain knowledge of the law, though it is very weak and hazy [on account of sin]. Hence it was and is always necessary to hand on to them that knowledge of the law so that they may recognize the magnitude of their sin, the wrath of God, etc.»<sup>70</sup>. As a result of the fall the law does not resonate clearly and unequivocally within the human heart, but acts externally: demanding, accusing and judging. In brief, natural law is written on the heart, although its dictates are not always clearly present to us given our fallen condition. To overcome this ignorance, we stand in need of divine revelation.

In effect, Luther tells us, God revealed his law through Moses, especially in the Decalogue. Certainly, with the passage of time the Mosaic law came to include different aspects of Jewish national law, for example that regarding circumcision, regulations on the jubilee year, the celebration of the Sabbath, and the proper way of treating the poor. Yet, as Paul taught, mere fulfillment of this law does not save us: in Luther's words, «Moses is dead... He is of no further service»<sup>71</sup>. However, the Decalogue which Moses concretized re-

<sup>68</sup> Cfr. LOHSE, B., *Martin Luther's Theology*, 273-276.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 273.

<sup>70</sup> LUTHER, M., WA 39/1, 361, 19-22.

<sup>71</sup> LUTHER, M., WA 16, 373, 12; 375, 14.



mains. And it may be summed up in the two commandments of the New Testament: love of God and love of neighbor. In the words of Bernhard Lohse, «the law is abrogated as a way of salvation but is by no means eliminated. Alongside its accusing function it remains in effect as commandment, as admonition, as announcement of the divine will. Luther actually assumed a persistence of the law into eternity»<sup>72</sup>. And he said: «The law is not annulled in eternity, but will remain – either to be fulfilled among the damned, or among the saved»<sup>73</sup>.

The law is given, Luther says, *ad duplicem usum*<sup>74</sup>, for two distinct purposes or functions: the ‘political’ or ‘civic’, and the ‘theological’. The first is external and refers to order in society, thus involving the need to inculcate commands, instruct consciences and punish evildoers. This is undertaken by temporal authorities such as parents, teachers, judges and civil leaders: «among men, temporal righteousness has its own honor and its own reward in this life, but not with God»<sup>75</sup>. However the theological use responds to the authentic purpose of the law, the true spiritual sense, according to Luther. Law spiritually «reveals our sinfulness and increases it. In such a fashion, the law spiritually construed delivers up to the divine wrath»<sup>76</sup>. Law speaks to us of our intimate relationship with God, as sinners, yet leads us to gratitude. Yet the law is also formational, with categorical content.

So we can see that the value of ‘good works’ on the part of the believer lies not only in a general spirit of gratitude to God for his gifts, but also in an ever growing knowledge and observation of the law, of the Decalogue, precisely as the fruit of that gratitude. Specific good works are by no means excluded from Christian life. Of course Luther’s consistently exhortatory style in moral issues would be meaningless should there be no such thing as moral responsibility.

Still we may ask: is there any way of connecting these two elements – the need to show gratitude and knowledge of the moral law – in keeping with Luther’s theology? Perhaps the following may be said.

<sup>72</sup> LOHSE, B., *Martin Luther's Theology*, 275.

<sup>73</sup> LUTHER, M., WA 39/1, 350.

<sup>74</sup> Cfr. LOHSE, B., *Martin Luther's Theology*, 270-272.

<sup>75</sup> LUTHER, M., WA 391, 441.

<sup>76</sup> LOHSE, B., *Martin Luther's Theology*, 271.



## 7. GRATITUDE AND KNOWLEDGE OF THE MORAL LAW

Human free will is neither a mere word, a cover-up for determinism, nor is it an autonomous power that permits humans to do as they please and construct their own identity without presuppositions of any kind. Rather it is the created power capable of receiving the gifts of God, gifts of all kinds, gifts of grace and nature; of receiving or of rejecting, as the case may be. In the context of Catholic theology, believers are prepared to hold that we are capable of knowing the content of God's law by reasoned reflection on the natural world<sup>77</sup>. This is called 'natural law', the knowledge of which, as we saw, Luther does not exclude, though considering it weakened on account of sin. Besides, Christians are inclined to obey and observe the law precisely insofar as they recognize with gratitude its gift character. Their works are 'good' not only because they are in external conformity with the will of God, but more fundamentally because they are an expression of personal gratitude to the One who lavished them so abundantly with his gifts and grace.

On account of human sinfulness, Luther may have been more pessimistic than Catholics generally are as regards the human capacity of coming to know the will of God from the nature of creatures. But he did not deny the existence of natural law which is written on everyone's heart. Maybe he doubted that natural law was *fully knowable*. Perhaps for this reason he insisted so forcefully on the importance of Christian preaching, a topic Pope Francis has spoken about on repeated occasions<sup>78</sup>. In fact, Luther held «that the preaching of the law should not precede the preaching of the gospel»<sup>79</sup>. That is, the wider context of Christian moral exhortation is that of salvation and forgiveness won by Christ for humanity. Still, the pervading sense of gratitude towards God that may be found in many of his writings and in those of other contemporaneous Protestant texts makes it perfectly reasonable for him to speak of the need to do good works in abundance: «if works to not follow on [from faith], it is certain that faith in Christ does not reside in the our heart, but is dead»<sup>80</sup>.

<sup>77</sup> On the question of natural law, cfr. INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION, *In Search of a Universal Ethic: A New Look at the Natural Law* (2009); O'CALLAGHAN, P., *Algunas reflexiones sobre identidad cristiana, laicidad y ley natural*, in *Identidad cristiana. Coloquios universitarios*, edited by A. ARANDA, Pamplona: Eunsa, 2006, 200-214. In Protestant theology, especially Calvinist, cfr. ARNOV, N., «Precedents and Prospects for Incorporating Natural Law in Protestant Ethics», *Scottish Journal of Theology* 69/4 (2016) 375-388.

<sup>78</sup> Pope FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (24-XI-2013), nn. 135-144.

<sup>79</sup> LOHSE, B., *Martin Luther's Theology*, 180.

<sup>80</sup> LUTHER, M., WA 39/1, 44.

## 8. CONCLUSION

For Luther God is the center of the universe, before whom the created world is as nothing. That is why he does not focus on the relationship between God and the world in terms of the typically Catholic '*et – et*', but in terms of an '*aut – aut*', 'either – or' more common among Protestants. Rather he speaks of what has its roots exclusively in God's action by using the term *sola*, 'alone': *sola gratia*, *sola fide*, *sola Scriptura*, *solus Christus*. Of course creation is also God's work, but before grace, and faith, and Scripture, and Christ himself, the creature is as nothing: grace trumps freedom; faith renders reason inconsequential; the word of God empties human traditions; Christ is the only Savior of the world. In this study we have considered the principle of *sola gratia*, in the context of its relationship to human freedom and response. We have seen that according to Lutheran theology humans respond to grace not by 'giving' anything back to God but by being grateful to him for the gifts received. Yet this is a truly human action, which we can refuse to carry out. Gratitude is made concrete in the effort of humans to know and understand and listen to and accept the inner workings of divine gifts (creation, grace, etc.). Thus grace not only provides strength to fulfill God's will, but at a more profound level heals the sinful ingratitude of humans and brings them to freely and willingly seek out and follow God's will in everything, also in the gift of nature he has provided us with.

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