

What Every Christian Needs To Know – Grace Alone

The fourth thing that every Christian needs to know is “grace alone”. Last week we looked at “faith alone”. We learn from “faith alone” that good works are excluded in our salvation. We are saved not by good works, said Luther, but “alien works”. The Latin word for “alien” means “another”. We are saved by the works of another. And that another is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ. It is His works that merited for us righteousness.

“Grace alone” is also contrasted with another error taught by the medieval Catholic theologians. The Church in the Middle Ages taught that man did not completely lose his free will in the Fall. Although ruined by sin, his will is not totally destroyed. Fallen man could decide for himself what is good for him, including his own salvation.

Man, of course, has to make a decision about his salvation. But the problem is that the medieval Church taught that God could not do anything about his salvation unless man, left to his own will, decide to want it. In other words, man’s will must first act before God could act to save him. The free will of man must precede the free grace of God. If the human will does not give consent, God’s free grace has no power to convert him.

Luther debated with a famous Catholic theologian Erasmus concerning this issue. He said to the humanist scholar that he alone saw the real issue of the Reformation. The entire Reformation is about free grace. The Renaissance is about the triumph of the human will.

The Reformation does not deny man’s free will. In fact, it insists that man indeed must respond to God’s call to salvation. But man can only respond if God’s grace first converts man’s will. It is only when God first changes his will, and gives to it a new spiritual power that man is able to turn to God to receive Christ.

Grace alone is a precious teaching in our Christian theology. In a performance-driven society, the Church can sometimes err by embracing the medieval teaching that man can do the works of God by his own will. Much of the preaching today takes this spirit. “God has done everything. It is up to you to act.” But “grace alone” corrects this teaching. It makes us realise that we are not as good as what people say we are. We are actually dead in sins and trespasses. We cannot turn to God unless God first turns our will to Him. Our salvation is not dependent on free will. Our salvation is an act of free grace.

John 1:12-13 "But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His name: Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God."

By Pastor Cheah Fook Meng