# By grace alone: 'Who makes the first move in salvation?'

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*We welcome the first of four addresses, subtitled, 'Key themes of the Protestant Reformation', by one of the Editorial Board of* Evangel

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The phrase which we are reflecting on here is 'by grace alone'. The question at issue is, who makes the first move in salvation – us or God? For a thousand years, western Christianity said in theory that God makes the first move, firstly because he chooses those whom he will save, and secondly because he makes a way whereby they can be saved, through his self-giving in Christ. So far, so good. But in practice, people were given the impression that it all depended on them. They had to make the first move

That word 'grace' can be a slippery one. We think of it as something equivalent to poise, when we speak of somebody moving gracefully. Or we use it as part of a courtesy title, 'His Grace the Duke of Norfolk'. But in Christian teaching, grace is first and foremost the favour of God shown to those who don't deserve it. If we look at the New Testament, God is revealed to us as the one who loved us before ever we loved him. Romans 5.8, for example, says that 'while we were still sinners Christ died for us'. And the salvation which Christ secured by his death and resurrection is God's gift: 'By grace you are saved . . . it is the gift of God' (Ephesians 2.8).-Grace, then, is God showing his love to those who don't deserve it. In other words, God has made the first move. Someone once defined grace, G R A C E, as 'God's riches at Christ's expense'. A bit corny, but they had a point. In the same way, the man to whom we owe more than any other for translating the Bible into English, William Tyndale, described grace as God's favour, which led him to give Christ to us, even though we were undeserving.

There's another aspect to that phrase 'by grace alone', one which isn't talked about much in English churches these days. Earlier on, we commented that in theory, most 16th-century western Christians, like St Augustine before them, believed that God chooses those whom he will save, although they disagreed about the basis on which God did this. This idea is called 'predestination', and it's a very difficult notion for us to swallow. But you can find it, for instance, in the 17th of the *39 Articles*. Now this theme of God's choice runs throughout the Bible. In the Old Testament, he chose Abraham, and then the nation of Israel, not only to enjoy a special relationship with him but also to be a means of blessing for the whole world. Jesus Christ was the chosen one par excellence. New Testament believers were told that God had chosen them before they chose him. Whatever we believe about this idea of predestination, and however we believe it works, the point is not that God chooses people so they can look down on others, but that he chooses people with a purpose in view – to make them like his Son. If you are a Christian believer, then that is God's purpose for your life – to make you like Christ.

As Tyndale pointed out, this is not a doctrine for idle speculation. It is psychologically and spiritually dangerous to start wondering about whether we are predestined or not. Rather, it is meant to comfort Christians when they are fighting against sin and seeking to grow more like Christ, because it reminds us that God's purpose for us will not be frustrated; we have not believed in vain. As Paul put it in Philippians 1, 'He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion'. Our part is to embrace God's promises in Scripture and to turn to him in repentance for our sin and trust in Christ.

Saying that salvation is 'by grace alone', that (as Archbishop William Temple put it) we contribute nothing to our salvation except the sin from which we need to be saved, doesn't mean that we sit back and say, 'Well, if it all depends on God there's nothing I can do'. I have known of some Christians who take that line, but it is dangerous and unbiblical. It's better to recall the words of the 5th-century bishop Augustine of Hippo, whom the Catholic Church recognized as the 'doctor (or expert teacher) of grace'. He portrays God as saying, 'You would not seek me if you had not already found me'. In other words, if our hearts are stirred to seek God, then that is a sign that his Spirit is already at work within us. With that encouragement, we can seek God, knowing that we shall find him. He is more willing to be found than we are to seek. And we do not need to wait until we have cleaned up our act before we come to God. The point about grace is that we don't deserve it, and that God welcomes us when we come to him as we are. For the Reformers, nothing in salvation was based on any merit or response of ours. It is God's gift to those who don't deserve it. It is 'by grace alone' that we are brought to Christ, and 'by grace alone' that we live as Christians.

The Reformers understood that left to ourselves, we will not choose to turn to God. As Article 10 of the *39 Articles* put it, we cannot prepare ourselves to turn to God or to do works pleasing to him. Human beings choose to sin – to run their own lives independently of God. By nature, we seek our own interests in all that we do; we are 'turned in on ourselves'. As Jesus said, 'Anyone who commits sin is a slave to sin' (John 8.34). That being so, they said, we are never going

to make the first move in salvation. Now, we might look at certain types of sinner and say, 'Well, I can see how it might be true of someone who is addicted to some particular substance or behaviour which they don't want to give up, but not me'. But maybe we too have our more respectable addictions – pride, perhaps, or material gain, or the right to run our own lives and put our own interests first. Yet Jesus Christ came to free us from our addiction to sin, and to make us his people. And there's a wonderful phrase in the liturgy where we acknowledge that he is the one 'in whose service is perfect freedom'. Our whole life as believers is a response to God's amazing grace, grace that was at work to save us.