

## In Between St. Augustine and Luther: Grace and Justification

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**Abstract** - *The view presented in this study emphasized grace as a cause of spiritual strength and justification of man. In understanding the deep meaning and nature of grace, this paper analyzes the formations given on the subject by two great minds, St. Augustine and Martin Luther. Because of the great influence of their work on the theology of grace and justification, this paper attempts to seek whether man's understanding and belief of prudence would mean nothing at all, that any good that he will perform on his behalf would do nothing for his own justification. Thus it raises the question on the purpose of man's freedom if his proprium is nothing and that divine prudence is the source of everything good. This led to the idea that grace is the primary energy source of man to make good, not by his own, but by divine prudence to obtain justification. Therefore, in this sense there is nothing good in man.*

**Keywords:** *Grace, Justification, Good works, faith, and Freedom*

### I. INTRODUCTION

The question of the means of justification that has been present for decades became the “watershed” that divides the Catholicism and Protestantism, specifically in the theology presented by St. Augustine and Martin Luther. This is due to the different perspectives of theology that the two poles are professing. Justification for St. Augustine is through God's grace, and apart from this grace, man cannot do anything good out of himself, which is the cause of justification while Martin Luther believed that salvation depends not on human effort or merit but only on the freely given grace of God, which is accepted in faith. Good works are not disdained but are regarded as the result of God's grace working in the life of the believer. The issue raised in this opposing theology of grace, as the cause of justification, revolved around the question of divine sovereignty and its relation to human freedom. Does man need God's grace in order to do anything good for the cause of his justification? Or grace is something totally gratuitous that would merit man's justification without good works? This is the theological fault line that divides the Catholic from Protestant. The thrust of this paper does not really intend to show the other side of each theology from the two great minds or to compare their theological ideas but to use this as a tool for further understanding the nature and meaning of grace and justification by faith in Christ. Thus, to begin to unravel the intricate points of the dispute between St.

Augustine and Luther, it may be helpful to discuss each theology respectively.

### II. St. Augustine's Theology of Grace

St. Augustine was the absolute denial of any human capacity for good apart from grace and the denial even of any freedom with respect to the acceptance of grace. One received grace as a result of God's eternal, predestining decree. Grace does not depend on human choice. Joyce, George Hayward (1950) explains that this road of ideas of St. Augustine would mean a total dependency on God's grace in order for man to perform a good work for himself. Everything that is good is attributed to God, the source of all good, and since man is part of that goodness of God, he cannot make good out of himself but rather only through the grace of God. Thus, this syllogism may lead to conclusion that freedom has no use for man in determining his action whether it is good or evil and cannot make contribution to his own justification. What, therefore, is the purpose of having this free will if man cannot do anything good for everything and are just dependent on God?

The turning point for St. Augustine in developing such theology was derived from the saying of St. Paul in his first letter to Corinthians, which recalls the gratuitousness of grace, “*What do you have that you did not receive? And if you have received it, why do you boast about it as if it were not a gift?*” (4:7). But this is not the only biblical basis that St. Augustine used to

prove that good work could merit man's justification. We find this in the recurrent reference to reward in the New Testament passages such as in the gospel of Matthew 5:12; 6:1-6,18; 10:32-33; 25:31-46; Mark 9:41-43; Luke 14:12-14; 19:11-27; and the most well-known passage frequently used to denote faith and work as a means of justification can be found in James 2:24-26- "*But faith without work is dead*". With these passages, St. Augustine established his theological precept on grace and justification. Thus, the theme of total human dependency on God explains the notion that the desire to live a good and moral life is not due to man's own whim but rather to the inspiration of God alone. This means that before man begins to do good works, the grace of God is already operative, prompting him to act, strengthening the will and empowering him to perform works of charity. For St. Augustine, the human will must be entangled in a web of self-centeredness that it cannot free itself, cannot even receive the promises of grace and seek divine aid, unless it is spurred into action by the invitation and initiative of God's grace. St. Augustine summarizes his theological position that both acknowledge God's sovereignty and human freedom to respond. However, the relationship he describes between God, who is present to us through grace, and the human person who is free but imperfect, is not a 50/50 equation. It is one in which grace holds the primacy. St Augustine's theology of grace influenced the Catholic Church doctrine and held that "*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 received the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works.*" In the history of the Catholic Church Councils, the Council of Orange (529) and the Council of Trent affirmed that we are "*Justified gratuitously, because none of the things that precede justification, whether faith or works, merit the grace of justification.*"

### **Historical Key: The Pelagian Controversy**

According to Laister McGrath (1998), the situation that affected the understanding of grace in Western Christianity and pushed St. Augustine to depend his theological position and subsequent developments in the doctrine of grace was due to the theological claim of Pelagius that man had free will and consequently had the power to do good, to convert themselves from sin by their own power, and the ability to work out for their own justification. Pelagius saw the human person as a being essentially free and capable of deciding his own

destiny. All that matters is the decision and strength and will on the part of man to increase in spiritual perfection. In this view, Pelagius never denied the reality of grace, though he did in fact play down its role in human decision-making. What he rejected is the idea of St. Augustine on the primacy of God's grace to enable man to shake off his inertia and live a good life, which seems to weaken the ability of man to do good.

Furthermore, Pelagius commented that by holding on to the theological position of St. Augustine, it seemed to suggest that human being was merely a puppet completely determined by the movements of God's grace. It is important to reiterate what Pelagius believed about man, acknowledging grace as the ultimate source of action as a gift of God. For Pelagius, grace was first of all human freedom itself; it is a God-given faculty of man to decide between good and evil. This is basically true and in a striking way resonates with our contemporary perspective of self-autonomy and responsibility for one's growth and development. St. Augustine likewise admitted this truth - he did not deny man's ability to choose but insisted that our desires and affections are alienated from the good and locked in a web of sin (Catholic Encyclopedia Vol. 6, 1906).

Pelagius and St. Augustine stand as symbols which highlight the poles of discussion on the issue. The former stand respectively for human autonomy, while the latter on total dependence on God. This is not a simple case of one being totally right and the other totally wrong. Both poles acknowledge grace truly as a gift from God same as human freedom. These two gifts to man must complement each other and not destroy the other one. This suggests a kind of collaborative principle between God and human beings. God helps man to uplift himself and man on his part does his effort to reach God. Although man is still dependent on the divine providence, this dependency does not mean he is hopeless to do anything good for own justification.

### **Martin Luther's Theology of Grace**

Martin Luther believed that salvation depends not on human effort or merit but only on the freely given grace of God, which is accepted in faith. Good works are not disdained but are regarded as the result of God's grace working in the life of the believer. Markus Wriedt (2003) pointed out that this doctrine of justification by grace through faith became a fundamental tenet of Protestant churches. Luther and other reformers believed that Catholicism had put too much emphasis on the need for believers to gain merits, to work their

way into God's favor by performing good deeds, by fasting, by making pilgrimages, and, in the popular view of Luther's time, by buying indulgences. For Protestants, this seemed to make the redemptive sacrifice of Christ unnecessary and to leave human beings, all of who are necessarily sinners, in doubt as to their salvation. The reformers intended to stress the mercy of God, who bestows grace on undeserving sinners through the saving activity of Jesus Christ. This idea of Luther was really a tremendous turning point of enlightenment that happened in the sole history of the Catholic Church. Many Catholics that time has shown their appreciation to his works that led them to reflect more on God, a love that is being experienced through the grace that is ever present in man. All we have to do is to realize that it is there, a grace-freely-given to us. Luther believed every man who has faith in Christ is justified. And there is no other means of obtaining this realization of justification but only through the merit of Christ.

It can be recalled that the question of personal salvation promoted during the late medieval period views that justification can be earned by good works. Indulgences, Mass offerings and works of penance seemed to offer a semi-automatic assurance of justification. Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut Lehman (1986) explained that it was for this reason that led Luther to publicly say that justification could only come "by faith alone." Luther went beyond St. Augustine's primacy of grace to the primacy of faith. For him, it was not enough to say that our reward was the crowning of God's own gift, as what St. Augustine declared. Luther added that we do not become just on the basis of the divine gift of grace or because of good works, but solely on the basis of Christ's righteousness which we receive through faith. Furthermore, he added that though we are forgiven and saved, we remain sinners, having nothing of good in ourselves all in Christ's. Therefore, the very of merit, whether condign, that is, something that you earn when your efforts are justly rewarded or congruous when a reward is bestowed for some reason, must be rejected. In the strict sense, grace of justification and final perseverance can never be merited. This means good works are not needed as human prudence is nothing.

Moreover, Luther insisted that Christians, as long as they live in this world, are sinners and saints simultaneously. They are saints insofar as they trust in God's grace and not in their own achievements. Sin, however, is a permanent and pervasive feature in the church as well as in the world, and a saint is not a moral

paragon but a sinner who accepts God's grace. Thus, for Luther, the most respected citizen and the habitual criminal are both in need of forgiveness by God. How wonderful the theology of Luther, looking at God as merciful and compassionate God that every man who would hear His teaching will eventually be sure of His salvation. On the other hand, looking in it thoroughly may appear that Luther gave so much emphasis on Divine Providence through the merit of Christ's cross. This is what actually known as his theology of the cross. Luther asserted that Christian theology is the theology of the cross rather than a theology of glory. Human beings cannot apprehend God by means of philosophy nor ethics; they must let God be God and see Him only where He chooses to make Himself known. Thus, Luther stressed that God reveals his wisdom through the foolishness of preaching, His power through suffering, and the secret of meaningful life through Christ's death on the cross.

Moreover, according to Herbert Bouman (1955), Luther does not take away the free will of man, he never discussed it in a broad way but during the Reformation, the question of free will became a religious battleground. Nevertheless, this kind of attitude towards faith would lead us eventually to a lenient faith, which believes in the tolerance and mercy of God in dealing with the sinfulness of man. Faith is not something that is to be easily handled; it requires much focus and attention on doing faith to prove that his merit of justification is worthy enough to be received by anyone who has faith in Christ. This does not suggest that we should slack our hands and wait for the Divine Providence to do everything. God already did his part and it is up to us now to do ours. Christ died only once for us, but He is continuously dying because of our sins. The continuity of this passion on the cross of Christ reminds us that he justified us; however, this we have to prove ourselves worthy of His self-giving by doing the same act of love that He has showed to us. By faith alone is the way we will prove ourselves worthy of the merit of Christ's cross.

#### **Historical Key: The Issue on Grace and Merit**

To understand the meaning and centrality of Luther's teaching on grace and justification, it is helpful to see the historical context of his theology. The change in Luther's understanding of grace can be traced from two sources: a return to the tradition of St. Augustine's understanding of grace and a deep study of the bible. This involved the rejection of the scholastic model and scriptural approach instead of a philosophical one.

Martin Luther made a courageous stand against the preaching of the Dominican Friar, Johann Tetzel, who is authorized by the Vatican to sell indulgences. The effectiveness of these indulgences was predicated on the doctrine of the treasury of grace proclaimed by Pope Clement VI. The theory was that merit earned by acts of piety could supplement the believer's stock of sanctifying grace. Gifts or donations to the Church were acts of piety. The Church had a treasury full of grace above and beyond what was needed to get its faithful into heaven. The Church was willing to part with some of its surplus in exchange for earthly gold. Martin Luther's anger against this practice, which seemed to him involving the purchase of salvation, began a swing of the pendulum back towards the vision of grace that he found in the letter of St. Paul to the Romans 3:21-26 that states,

*"This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood, to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearances he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished. He did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus."*

As opposed to the treasury of grace, Luther taught the penitents to acknowledge the inadequacy of their own resources and trust only in God to save them that for God, by the precious blood of his son, already credited those who believe in him and thus, they belong to him.

### III. DISCUSSION

After discussing the two doctrines from these two great minds, I would like to clear my stand on this topic that I do not mean to favor nor to disapprove any of these doctrines but I stand in between them to analyze, reflect and determine my faith-understanding about the subject matter. We have seen how the attitudes and perspectives on grace and justification changed from "Sola Gratia" (by grace alone) to "Sola Fides" (by faith alone). As St. Augustine stresses the primacy of grace over human effort and acts, he respectively declared the need of internal divine aid to accomplish any good

works for the possibility of justification. While Martin Luther's emphasis is on the essential aspect of Christ's righteousness, he believed for total dependence on God, that is, looking at God as merciful and compassionate, by Christ's blood on the cross, every man who has faith in Him will eventually be sure of his justification. Truly, our two great minds stand as symbols, which highlight the poles of discussion on the issue.

On the issue of human freedom, I found it very lax and extreme in any sense. St. Augustine gave so much emphasis on total dependency on God that he already forgot to use his human ability to determine himself to perfection. On the other hand, Luther gave so much emphasis on the Divine Providence that he had forgotten to strive in order to attain that perfection for himself. He became so lenient in his faith and concluding that faith alone and not by any good works would justify man for his salvation. But if we thoroughly analyze their propositions, using the modern lenses, we might find some lapses and flaws in their teaching. St. Augustine, with his negative view of human nature, does not seem to give full justice to human freedom and autonomy. Thus he totally conceded to God's grace as the only possible way of salvation under the shadow of predestination. However, this kind of attitude of St. Augustine has the tendency towards fatalism and despondency while Martin Luther, as he vehemently reacted against the scandals of the Church on the practice of the treasury full of grace, gave so much emphasis on the Divine Providence that he had forgotten to give effort in order to attain that perfection for himself as he became so lenient in his faith. Accordingly, Christ died for us and He continues to die because of our sins. The continuity of this passion on the cross of Christ reminds us that He justified us; however, what I believe lacking in his theology is the realization that we have to prove ourselves worthy of God through self-giving - by doing the same act of love that He has showed us, by showing love to our neighbors through good works. It can be recalled that Luther rejected the epistle of James that contains the element of good works that is opposing to his view of "sola fides."

To understand the similarities on the theology of St. Augustine and Martin Luther, we need to understand that the two different poles of theology were products of different contexts. This means that their theologies were basically crafted from the needs and situation of the Church. Bevans (2002) explains that doing theology in a context means taking experience as a constitutive element in understanding, appropriating and

communicating the faith. This implies a dialogue with praxis and requires, in accord with the Gospel, taking a stance with the context. All dimensions of the context, in any cultural setting, are taken into account so that contextuality pervades all theologizing, teaching and structuring of theological education. As such, this way of understanding and transforming reality requires an interdisciplinary approach. Jose De Mesa (2003) added that this way of theologizing implies the integration of context rather than a negation or separation from the context. Such contextual mindset is not realized by adding some new subjects about contextual theology in a traditional curriculum of theological education, but by a restructuring of it so that all the subjects support the main concern of contextual theologizing.

This somehow would fit the definition of St. Anselm when he said that faith is a *“faith seeking understanding.”* Historians would point for the start of what they call modern theology during the 16th century when many believers began to question religious doctrine. According to Kurt Aland (1986) one concrete example of this is the dispute between St. Augustine and Martin Luther on the theology of grace and justification. As society has progressed, followers of various religious beliefs have begun to question the origins and validity of religious truths. Hence, the advent of a new theology developed typically refers to the evolution of religion. This has necessitated changes in how religion is taught and studied, as well as the doctrines followed by specific religious groups. This simply means that although they differ in the way of interpreting grace, justification and human freedom, they seem to follow the same path for attaining justification through God’s grace. Bevans (2002) suggests that all theologies are crafted in different context. This means it behooves us to understand that the theologies of St. Augustine and Luther were from different context. The way particular authors omit or include material, place a saying into a certain context, add interpretative comments, or emphasize certain features of the tradition by expansion may reveal not only creativity in writing but a certain theological concern. Martin Luther did not actually change the first hand tradition written by St. Augustine or the basic truth of the tradition about grace and justification. But rather Luther did treat its message as a living tradition that could be applied and reapplied in the life of the community of Christianity according to the needs and situation of the people.

The similarity that they both shared in this great diversity and complexity of thought is the notion that

they both choose to submit themselves to the mercy, goodness, and grace of God for their justification. The fact that they choose to put their faith in Christ would mean clear evidence that they exercise their freewill and they believed that through the grace of God man’s justification is possible. This reminds me of the saying; *“The bird looks for a shelter when it rains but an eagle flies above the clouds to escape the rain,”* which means they have different solutions for the same problem.

#### **IV. CONCLUSION**

This is not to prove a case of one being totally right and the other totally wrong. Good arguments from reason and experience can be brought together. With open minds, we try to integrate the good we find in both sides despite the paradoxes and ambiguities of life. It is in preserving the creative tension of the two that we learn to value the different points of view, and deepen our understanding of the mystery of God’s grace for our justification.

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