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Slogans are dangerous things. But they are also useful things. Great movements and companies and even nations often develop slogans. ‘In God We Trust’ is a slogan. It can be a dangerous slogan when taken one way: “Nothing can stop us with God on our side!” – a statement of pride and self-satisfaction.

But it can be a useful slogan, if it is understood to sum up what a people ought to be and on whom they must depend. It seems to me that slogans are dangerous because they can oversimplify the issues. But they are useful precisely because they can focus the issues.

Christianity is a great movement in the history of the world. And there have been various slogans made up by Christians over the centuries – slogans that sum up what Christians stand for or believe to be true above all else. These slogans were and are sometimes dangerous, because they oversimplify. They can be misinterpreted, because they are such brief expressions. But they can also be very useful ways of saying concisely and precisely what matters.

I want to look at an important Christian slogan, which was developed in the sixteenth century during the Reformation in Europe. Martin Luther was responsible for putting this slogan together. And it is a most useful summary of the central realities of Christianity. It is, in my opinion, one of the clearest ways of seeing the Christian answer to the greatest questions of life.

Consider it with me – not out of antiquarian interest but because here we can understand the message of Christianity. We are living in a time when it is imperative for Christian people to be clear in their understanding. It is imperative for those investigating Christianity to understand what they are investigating. There are so many alternatives. Some of the alternatives are religious. Some even claim to be Christian. But if we are going to either evaluate the Christian message, or be in a position to recognise deviations from that message, we must be clear about the message itself. And this slogan is as good a way as any I know to summarize the essentials.

The slogan has four parts. Martin Luther coined it in Latin: *Sola gratia* (‘by grace alone’), *Sola Christi* (‘by Christ alone’), *Sola Scriptura* (‘by Scripture alone’), and *Sola fide* (‘by faith alone’). This is not only a collection of important Bible themes. In these four phrases, we find a precise and orderly summary of Christian doctrine. Let’s draw out their significance by asking four basic and consecutive questions.

1. How can a person be right with God?

There is no more basic or important question in life. All other questions pale into insignificance. God is the creator of all that is. He is the one to whom I owe my very existence. He is the one to whom I must answer for my life. How can I be right with God? What makes me right with God?

Everybody has their answer to this question – even if they wouldn’t quite put the question like this. Even those who deny the very existence of God come to some view about how to get life right. But getting life right means getting right with God – whatever that higher being or plane is in their descriptions. Some assume that ‘right with God’ is our natural state. We simply are right

with God. There is nothing at all to worry about. Others think that getting right with God or staying right with God is a great incentive to good, religious living. If you are good enough or religious enough, God will accept you.

But the answer that is summed up in our slogan is **'by grace alone'**. Those three words sum up a fundamental teaching of the Bible. 'Grace' is God's unmerited, undeserved favour. 'By grace alone' means that our getting right with God is God's doing, God's display of unmerited, undeserved favour.

Frankly, it is another way of saying that God is God. Ever since the creation, the universe has been dependent on God for all things. So if we ask why the universe exists, the answer is 'by grace alone'. The universe did not bring itself into existence. The universe did not deserve to be created. As the first sentence in the Bible puts it "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen 1:1). That is the ultimate explanation, the most important explanation of everything: God did it. Children, of course, delight in pushing questions further and further back – "Yes, but why did God create the universe?" And there is simply no answer to that question. "God did it" is the final explanation. No, it was not because God was lonely and needed company. Neither was it because God was bored and wanted something to do. No. God decided to do it because God decided to decide to do it. That is part of what it means to be God. There is no explanation for God's actions beyond God's own will. God acts 'by grace alone'.

And so it is with getting right with God. If someone asks me how I got right with God, the final answer is 'God did it'. It was 'by grace alone'. No, it was not because God was lonely. He really would have chosen better company if that was the problem! And it certainly was not that I did it. In Bible terminology, it was by God's grace, not by my actions.

Relating to God has always been like this. Think for a moment about the Old Testament. Genesis 1-11 tells the story of humanity's corruption as we throw aside God's rule, and set our own destinies. This sin brought God's judgement. But God did not then abandon his good purposes for his creation. In Genesis 12:1-3, God chooses Abraham. Why Abraham? Because Abraham was an outstanding man? A moral or religious giant? No. He was none of these things. God chose Abraham because God decided to choose Abraham. That's all – by grace alone.

Eventually the descendants of Abraham became the people of Israel, and they were God's people. Why?

The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers....

(Deuteronomy 7:7-8)

[By grace alone – by the unaccountable kindness of God.](#)

The New Testament is clearly the same. Jesus taught that this is how it is between us and God. 'Coming to Christ' means believing or trusting in Christ. That's the way to eternal life, said Jesus. But when you come to Christ, what does he tell you?

No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him

up on the last day.

(John 6:44)

If I have come to Christ, I have God the Father to thank! It is by his kindness that I have come. 'By grace alone'. The classic New Testament statement of this truth is in Ephesians 2:8-10. The emphasis is threefold: we are saved by God's grace, our faith in this grace is also a gift from God and we are God's workmanship, new creatures doing God's will.

There is an important emphasis on the word 'alone'. It is not that God does his bit and we do ours. We are talking about the unconditional kindness of God. His gracious forgiveness is given precisely to those who don't deserve it. That's why it is called forgiveness! What about the Lord helping those who help themselves? No, that is not a Christian slogan. The Lord helps those who cannot help themselves.

This is one of the scandals of Christianity. Human pride finds it very hard to accept the total worthlessness of our own efforts. We love our good works. We think that God should love them, too – and love us for them. We love our religion, and we think that God should love it, too – and love us for it. But it is not so. If God loves us, it is 'by grace alone'. We can only give thanks to him.

2. How does this grace come?

The two mistakes that are often made with the first part of the slogan are to think of God's grace as a vague expression that means God is nice to everyone – a sort of heavenly Santa Claus – or that we control this grace somehow. The first mistake fails to take God seriously. God is holy and pure. He is the one who will righteously judge the living and the dead. If he forgives a sinful person, it is nothing short of a miracle: a miracle of divine grace. The second mistake is the seedbed of human religion. Somehow we imagine that by our ceremonies and our rituals, by our sincerity and our piety, we will win God's favour. God's grace has become ours, because we think that what we do can secure it for us. And so we drift from authentic Christianity into the superstition of religion.

God's grace is God's grace. It is his kindness. And we cannot manipulate it for ourselves. If we could, it would not be grace. Grace is what God gives freely and without compulsion.

So our second question is important. How does God choose to be gracious to us? In what way does he deal with us 'by grace alone'?

Answer: **'By Christ alone.'**

These three words sum up what the Bible says about the awesome significance of Jesus Christ. In John 1:17, we read that "grace and truth came through Jesus Christ". Jesus said that God so loved this world that he graciously gave his Son to us that we might have eternal life. Peter explained the kindness of God when challenged by the Sanhedrin: "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

This claim is particularly scandalous today. More than ever before, we are aware of the variety of religious belief and practice that is to be found within the human race. What kind of arrogance is it that says that all truth is to be found in Jesus Christ alone? What kind of narrow-minded bigotry is reflected in the view that the grace of God comes to human beings in Christ alone?

The only greater arrogance that I can imagine is to say otherwise! For it is not our idea that the grace of God is found in Christ alone. It is his own:

Jesus answered, "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

(John 14:6)

The scandal cannot be avoided by imagining that Christ is a sort of spirit or principle that pervades all mankind and all religions. This ignores the facts. We are dealing with the personal claim of the Jesus Christ of history, the one who lived and taught and healed the sick and raised the dead in Palestine in the first century. It is that person who was seen and heard and touched, and who finally was executed on a cross, and then raised from death, and ascended to the right hand of God the Father. This Jesus Christ, this particular person, is the one who spoke the words recorded by John.

Now let me develop this a little further. Can we say more about how God's grace comes by Christ alone?

Romans 5:8 reads, "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." How does someone know, personally, the love of God? It is not by feeling loved by God. There could be no less reliable guide to reality than our feelings! And it is not by experiencing the goodness of God in general—in sunshine, good health and prosperity. People who are going to Hell experience those good things. God shows his love for us in the death of Christ for us. That is the grace of God! When I see that Christ died for me, then I know the grace of God. There is no other way. It is by Christ alone.

The same truth is put in different words in Colossians 2:6-10. Notice here that it is not only the beginning of the Christian life that is by grace alone, and by Christ alone:

So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.

(Colossians 2:6)

Paul's concern here is to warn his readers of the massive deception of those who teach that you can surpass Christ – that you can somehow go beyond Christ – that you may start with Christ, but in one way or another go further. In Christ "all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form" and "we have been given fullness in Christ".

Let's be people who delight in Jesus Christ, "whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption"(1 Cor 1:30).

This brings us to a third question:

3. How do we find Christ?

Again, this is crucial. And its answer determines the character of Christianity. Is ours a religion of ritual? Is it a religion of mystical experience? Is it a religion of monasteries? Is it a religion which has a class of holy men? Is it a religion, which has holy places? Is it a religion that has holy music?

Is it a religion that promotes ecstatic experiences? These questions depend on the answer to this third question: How do we find Christ?

John 5:24 tells us that people know Christ by hearing his word. In Matthew 7:24-26, Jesus indicates that a person can find him by responding to his words; by believing his promises; by obeying his commands. In short, by trusting him. By taking him at his word.

What were the words of Jesus about? Basically, they were about himself. They were about who he was, and what he came into the world to do, and what all this meant for human life. The 'gospel' is the news about Jesus, which Jesus himself taught, and which the apostles were commissioned to proclaim.

The answer to our question, How do we find Christ? is **'by Scripture alone'**. For this is what Scripture is – in the Scripture we have the words of Jesus recorded; we have the word about Jesus from the apostles he sent; we have the gospel of Christ.

The experience that is common to all Christian people is hearing the message of the Bible about Christ, and realizing that this message is not just the words of men, but the word of God himself (1 Thess 2:13). In the words of this book, God addresses me, tells me of Christ and demonstrates his love to me by speaking to me of the death of Christ for me. There is no other way in which we find Christ. We do not attempt to conjure up his presence by our religious practices. He addresses us in his word – a word that has been written down, and that is our Bible. We do not try to hear voices, or interpret an inner voice. The word of God to us, the gospel about Jesus Christ, has been given.

That is why the Bible is so important in Christianity – not as a sacred object to be venerated, and kept out of reach, but as the very word of the living God. We can see the importance of this message even before the complete New Testament was written (e.g. 2 Thess 2:13–15).

Let's be people who love the Bible, for in it God speaks to us of Christ and so nourishes us with the words of eternal life. Let's be committed to reading it, to studying it, to hearing it taught, and to encouraging others in these things.

There is one more question:

4. What is our part?

If our life before God as his forgiven children is by grace alone, which comes to us by Christ alone, who is known to us by Scripture alone, What is our part?

The last part of the slogan claims: **'by faith alone'**.

Faith is very much misunderstood. It is not that faith is the supreme Christian virtue, nor is faith a specially religious quality that enables people who have it to believe anything without thinking about it. Faith is trust. It is the experience of the person who has heard the word of God from the Scriptures, and who thereby has seen the grace of God in Christ. It is the experience of trusting God.

Several times, the New Testament points back to the Old Testament believer, Abraham, to explain what faith is and why it is so basic. Abraham received a promise from God in Genesis 12:1-3. The Bible tells us that this promise was really about Jesus. God's promise to bring blessing to the whole

world would be fulfilled through Christ. God's promise to Abraham was the gospel:

The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: "All nations will be blessed through you". So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

(Galatians 3:8)

In the first few verses of Genesis 15, Abraham expresses some difficulty in believing God's word of promise. But God reiterates his promise in Genesis 15:5 and Abraham then believes and God credits this to him as righteousness. Some have suggested that God was involved in some kind of play acting here. Abram had faith, but was a bit short on righteousness. Since he didn't have any righteousness to speak of, God pretended that his faith was righteousness. God had nothing to put in the righteousness column of his 'Abraham' ledger, so he put down his faith instead!

This view misses the point of both Genesis 15:6 and Paul's argument in Romans and Galatians. At a turning point in the history of the world, God had spoken his word of promise to Abraham. And Abraham believed God. In God's estimate, that is righteousness. That is man and God rightly related. God is not a dodgy bookkeeper – if God reckons it is righteousness, it is righteousness.

Now if we read the story of Abraham again, we notice what it is that creates this faith in God. It is not a virtue in Abraham for which he is rewarded with a promise. Abraham's faith is created by God. Isn't it the word of God's promise which brings about Abraham's faith? By himself he cannot believe it. That's how Genesis 15 begins – with Abraham's doubting, unbelieving complaint. How does Abraham change from doubting in verse 2 to believing in verse 6? What happens between verse 2 and verse 6? God speaks his promise to him – again. God, by his promise, brings about a response of trust from Abraham. And so it is for us.

This is Christianity. God's grace expressed in Christ made known in Scripture and received by faith. It is so simple! So amazingly wonderful. It is a slogan to stand by.

There is a marvellous description of this faith in God by Martin Luther:

Faith is not something dreamed up, a human illusion; although this is what many people understand by the term. Whenever they see that it is not followed either by an improvement in morals or by good works, while much is still being said about faith, they fall into the error of declaring that faith is not enough, that we must do 'works' if we are to become upright and attain salvation. The reason is that, when they hear the gospel, they miss the point; in their hearts, and out of their own resources, they conjure up an idea which they call 'belief', which they treat as genuine faith. All the same it is but a human fabrication, an idea without a corresponding experience in the depths of the heart. It is therefore ineffective and not followed by a better kind of life.

Faith, however, is something that God effects in us. It changes us and we are reborn from God. Faith puts the old Adam to death and makes us quite different men in heart, in mind, and in all our powers; and it is accompanied by the Holy Spirit. Oh, when it comes to faith, what a living, creative, active, powerful thing it is. It cannot do other than good at all times. It never waits to ask whether there is some good work to do.

Rather, before the question is raised, it has done the deed, and keeps on doing it. A man not active in this way is a man without faith. He is groping about for faith and searching for good works, but he knows neither what faith is nor what good works are. Nevertheless, he keeps on talking nonsense about faith and good works.

Faith is a living and unshakeable confidence, a belief in the grace of God so assured that a man would die a thousand deaths for its sake. This kind of confidence in God's grace, this sort of knowledge of it, makes us joyful, high-spirited, and eager in our relations with God and with all mankind.

That is what the Holy Spirit effects through faith. Hence the man of faith, without being driven, willingly and gladly seeks to do good to everyone, serve everyone, suffer all kinds of hardships, for the sake of the love and the glory of the God who has shown him such grace. It is impossible, indeed, to separate works from faith, just as it is impossible to separate heat and light from fire. Beware, therefore, of wrong conceptions of your own, and of those who talk nonsense while thinking they are pronouncing shrewd judgements on faith and works whereas they are showing themselves the greatest fools. Offer up your prayers to God, and ask him to create faith in you; otherwise, you will always lack faith, no matter how you try to deceive yourself, or what your efforts and ability.

Preface to Romans

Let's be people who live this life by the grace of God alone, by Christ alone, by Scripture alone, by faith alone.