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**Luke 2:21: The Circumcision of Jesus—A Very *Significant* Day**  
 (New Year’s Day sermon preached on January 1, 2012)

Paul Naumann

“*Grace be with all those who love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity. Amen*” (Eph. 6:24). The brief text that will occupy our thoughts this morning comes from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 2, verse 21: “*And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb*” (ESV). So far the holy Word.

In the Name of Jesus Christ, that precious Name before which we bow ourselves today, dear fellow redeemed.

If I asked you to name the most significant day of your life, it might take you a minute to come up with an answer. Most likely a number of days come to mind, which all have a special significance for you. It’s hard to single out just one. Spouses might think of the day they were married. Parents, no doubt, think of the day their child was born. Young people might think of the day of their confirmation, or the senior prom, or their high school graduation. These are all very significant days in their own right.

Well, as Christians we have another set of significant days, don’t we? We celebrated a big one last Sunday [Dec. 25, 2012] with the birth of our Savior. This Friday is another—the Epiphany of our Lord. April 8 [2012] is Easter, the most significant of all the Christian holidays. Did you know that *today* is actually a very significant day too? And not just on the Christian calendar either. It’s significant to you specifically and in a very personal way. This morning God’s Word will demonstrate to you that a day to which you probably haven’t given much thought is one of the most important days of your life. And so we consider as our theme:

**The Circumcision of Jesus—A Very *Significant* Day**

- I. The ceremony He underwent signified that He would keep the Law for you.
- II. The name He received signified that He would conquer sin for you.

I. At the root of the word *significant*, of course, is the word *sign*. In the Bible the word *sign* means a visible mark or event intended to convey a spiritual message. After the Flood the rainbow was a sign that God would never again destroy the world by water. The Passover lamb was a sign of the Lamb to come, the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world. And for the Jewish people there was no sign more important than the sign of circumcision. Which may seem strange to us, since in our day

circumcision is but a minor medical procedure. It is performed on a little over half the male infants born in the USA. Doctors are divided about whether there's any medical advantage in doing it, but either way it's not at all significant. Not so for ancient Israel. For them circumcision was incredibly significant. It was a constant reminder of their identity as the people of God and their inclusion in the Gospel covenant God made with Abraham. God said to him: *"As for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. This is My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised; and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you. He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised, every male child in your generations. . . . And My covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant"* (Gen. 17:9-13).

I'd call that pretty important! No faithful Jewish parent would omit having their son circumcised on the eighth day after his birth. So when the baby Jesus was eight days old, Mary and Joseph did for Him what the Law required. Now consider: Why was this such a significant day in the life of our Lord and in your life as well? First of all, because **the ceremony He underwent signified that He would keep the whole Law for you.**

With circumcision a Jewish boy officially came under the Law that God gave to the people on Mt. Sinai. He became responsible for it and was obligated to keep all its provisions. The ceremony of circumcision presumed its subject to be a sinner and under the condemnation of God. Well, it was this obligation that Jesus took up when He willingly placed Himself under the Law.

I wonder if you realize what an amazing thing that is. I remember visiting a gym once where some weightlifters were practicing a lift called the snatch. That's when they pick a barbell up off the floor, lift it to their chest, and stand up. The weights they were using were huge; I knew I'd never be able to complete a lift like that, but I did wonder how far off the floor I could raise the barbell. Well, the answer was that I couldn't. I couldn't lift it one inch. The barbell might as well have been welded to the floor for all the effect my efforts had! God's Law is a lot like that. You think you're strong. You think you can keep the commandments. Or at least, if you can't keep them all, maybe you can lift the burden part way, make a start at satisfying God's demands. But it's a delusion. It's a delusion that vastly overstates your ability and vastly understates the strict requirements that God's Law places upon you. James reminds us: *"Whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all"* (James 2:10). And you and I have broken this Law not in one point, but in many points, every day. With every hurtful thing you have said to your spouse or your child. With every disparaging remark you have made about a coworker or relative. With every foul or angry word you've allowed to cross your lips. And those are just the sins of the tongue. What about the sins of our mind? The sins of our hands? *"We daily sin much,"* Luther says, *"and indeed deserve nothing but punishment."*

Now the good news is that Jesus Christ—the only Person who by nature was *not* subject to the Law—willingly placed Himself under the Law for you. That's what He was doing when He was circumcised. He put that heavy yoke upon His shoulders and lifted the crushing burden for you and me. We refer to this as Jesus' active obedience, and it doesn't get much press. We're always talking about His passive obedience, that brief yet very intense period of His passion when He suffered and died to atone for our sins. But equally important was His *active* obedience. Can you imagine? Thirty-three years of living each day in perfect compliance with the Law of God, perfect obedience to His Heavenly Father, without committing a single sin. The writer to the Hebrews says that He *"was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin"* (Heb. 4:15). And Jesus did it all for you. He stepped into your shoes and lifted the weight. He did what you and I could never do. In every place where we have broken God's commandments, Jesus kept them all. Jesus' mission from the very beginning was to take up this burden for us, which is exactly what the ceremony of His circumcision signified. Paul says, *"When the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons"* (Gal. 4:4-5). He came down to earth and was born a human child specifically so that He could take your place and provide you with a perfect

record of righteousness and obedience. That righteousness is yours now—a gift by faith from the Christ-Child to you. Yes, thank God for the day of Christ’s circumcision! What a significant day that was!

II. But that day was significant for another reason as well. It was significant for the name He received, the name “Jesus.” For **that name signified that He would also conquer sin for you.**

Ask any kid what the next most important day to Christmas is, and you know what he’ll say—it’s his birthday. Birthdays are important in our culture; but did you know that in much of Europe and Asia one’s birthday is no big deal? What’s important over there is a person’s *name day*, the day soon after birth when the child receives his name. In Christian cultures this often happens at the time of baptism.

A similar event took place in Hebrew culture. A child was customarily named on the eighth day, and for a male child that was the day of his circumcision. It was typical for a boy to be named after a male relative, ordinarily his father or grandfather. That’s why the relatives of Zecharias, you recall, objected to the choice given for his son, the name John. The name of Mary and Joseph’s child was similar to John’s in that it was not chosen by men, but by God Himself. Through His angel He gave to Joseph the name as well as its meaning. We hear in Matthew 1: “*Behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name JESUS, for He will save His people from their sins’*” (1:20-21).

That is why this day is so significant, for this name of Jesus is so meaningful for us. In America a child’s name seldom has any specific meaning; parents often choose a name simply because it sounds nice. Hebrew names were different. Every Hebrew name could be translated as a short description or statement. Each Hebrew name had a meaning and thus a significance to it. But no name was more significant than Jesus. *Jesus* is the English transliteration, of course. In Greek it’s *Iesous*. Both of these transliterate from the Hebrew/Aramaic *Ye’shua*, or *Yehoshua*, which means “Jehovah is our salvation.” It’s identical, by the way, to the Old Testament name *Joshua*. Which itself is significant, for what did Joshua do? He led the people of God into the promised land of Canaan. Thirteen centuries later his namesake, Jesus, would appear on earth to lead His people out of their captivity to sin and into the promised land of salvation and eternal life! That is why “*at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb*” (ESV). “Jehovah is our salvation.” What a fitting description of our Savior and His work, which makes the name given to the Babe of Bethlehem the most significant name in the history of the whole human race!

I saw a cartoon once that showed a boy standing on a snowy sidewalk, looking into a store window at a sign that said, “Have the best Christmas ever!” And in the thought balloon above his head the boy was musing to himself: “It’s pretty hard to top the first one.” It’s true, isn’t it? It’s impossible to top the first Christmas, for that is when God Himself—the great “I AM”—came down to earth as a human being to save you and me. On the day of His circumcision Jesus—“Jehovah Saves!”—shed the first drops of His blood for us. Drops that would become streams thirty-three years later when He gave up His life on the cross. My friends, it is in those blessed streams that you and I have been cleansed. Your sins have been washed away, conquered once and for all by Jesus, your Jehovah Savior. “*Nor is there salvation in any other,*” Peter said, “*for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved*” (Acts 4:12). And Paul said to the Philippians: “*Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father*” (Phil. 2:8-11). One day every knee will bow to that mighty name. And on that great Judgment Day you will enter the bright corridors of heaven because of that name, which identifies who your Savior is and what He does. It is JESUS, “JEHOVAH SAVES”!

Just a few weeks after His birth the Christ-Child would cross paths with an elderly believer in the Temple, and the encounter would be much greater than significant. It would be the most important day of the older man's life! This man was Simeon, who met Mary and Joseph in the Temple and took up the baby Jesus in his arms. He was so happy he could die—literally! Having met his Redeemer, he felt he was ready to leave the world a happy man. My Christian friend, there is no reason that you shouldn't be just as happy as Simeon when you leave our church this morning. Why, even happier! For the circumcision of Christ is one of the most significant days in your life too. The ceremony signified that He would keep the Law for you, and keep it He did! The name signified that He would conquer sin for you, and conquer it He has! In a few moments we'll receive our Redeemer's very body and blood in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. And when we're finished, we will sing the words of aged Simeon, words that have rung down joyfully through the centuries wherever believers have gathered: "*Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace, according to Thy word, for mine eyes have seen Thy salvation: which Thou hast prepared before the face of all people, a light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of thy people Israel.*" (TLH). In Jesus' saving Name let us also rejoice and hope. AMEN.

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### The Usage of *Grace* (χάρις) in the New Testament

Steven Sippert

We learn the word *grace* early on in our religious instruction, often hearing a definition like this: "Grace is God's undeserved love and kindness," with emphasis usually placed on the fact that this love from God is *undeserved*. Such a concept of χάρις has been upheld in confessional Lutheranism, taught in our churches, and proclaimed from our pulpits with the conviction that *grace*, as used in the New Testament especially, truly refers to God's undeserved love for us sinners given through Christ. Scripture, of course, enlightens Christians as to how the word is to be understood in its many contexts. To that end we direct our attention, noting both general and specific uses of χάρις in the New Testament.

χάρις was not coined for the first time by the Holy Spirit when He inspired its usage in the Greek New Testament. The common usage of the word can be traced in the ancient literature of secular writers, both Classical and Koine. In summary of its secular usage Trench states that "χάρις, connected with χαίρειν, is first of all that property in a thing which causes it to give joy to the hearers or beholders of it," and so it was used with the meaning of "beauty, loveliness, or charm" (157). Later usage, especially in Koine writings, conveyed another meaning. The word χάρις also expressed "favor" that one person would show to another. The concept of *undeserved* favor did not seem to be inherent in the secular usage of the word, although Trench maintains "that already in the ethical terminology of the Greek schools χάρις implied ever a favour freely done, without claim or expectation of return—the word being thus predisposed to receive its new emphasis, its religious, . . . its dogmatic, significance; setting forth as it does the entire and absolute freeness of the lovingkindness of God to men" (159). Be that as it may, it was still the Holy Spirit who chose this word and lifted it up to a far greater significance when He frequently employed χάρις in the New Testament to describe the loving disposition and benefaction that God has bestowed toward sinful man. We recognize this elevated, glorified usage especially in the Epistles of Paul.

#### Initial observations

- In the Septuagint χάρις was used to translate the Hebrew word חַן, but rarely to translate חֶסֶד, which seems to be the Hebrew word that comes closest to the New Testament idea of "grace." This opinion of Trench (158-9) is shared and defended by Paul Naumann in his *Journal* article "**חֶסֶד—Synonymous with Grace?**" that appeared in the September issue of 2010.

- χάρις does not occur in Matthew or Mark. Luke and John use it just a few times in their Gospels. Paul's Epistles employ χάρις with greater frequency than that of any other New Testament writer.

- The χάρις of God, His free grace and gift, displayed in the forgiveness of sins, is extended to men as they are in their *guilt*; the ἔλεος of God, His mercy and compassion, is extended to men as they are in their *misery* (Trench 161).

- Though examples of plural usage can be found in Koine secular literature, χάρις does not occur as a plural (“favors”) in the New Testament. When the inspired writers spoke of many or various gifts that God has given, they would use χαρίσματα (*gift, free gift, gift of grace*) or a substantive form derived from a different root.

In the following study of χάρις as used in the New Testament, I will approach the usage of the word categorically. In the examples offered below, unless otherwise noted, the New Testament quotations are taken from the *New King James Version* and italicized for the sake of distinction. The word translating χάρις is usually underlined. My words of commentary or explanation are indented.

### **Χάρις as *favor or goodwill* extended by people**

Luke 2:52 *And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.*

As He lived a perfect life, growing up in Nazareth, Jesus attracted the interest, respect, and “favor” (χάρις) of men. He also grew, we are told, in “favor” with God. Here’s a case where χάρις could not mean *undeserved love* since Christ never did anything to prove Himself unworthy of His Father’s love or goodwill.

Acts 2:46-47 *So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.*

Acts 24:27 *But after two years Porcius Festus succeeded Felix; and Felix, wanting to do the Jews a favor, left Paul bound.*

The idea of people showing “favor” to other people is apparent in these passages from Acts. Cf. also Acts 25:3 and Acts 25:9 for a very similar usage. The reason for the “favor” or goodwill depends on the context.

1 Corinthians 16:3 *And when I come, whomever you approve by your letters I will send to bear your gift to Jerusalem.*

2 Corinthians 8:19 *And not only that, but who [Titus] was also chosen by the churches to travel with us with this gift, which is administered by us to the glory of the Lord Himself and to show your ready mind.*

In gathering and sending offerings to the famine-stricken Christians of Judea, the Corinthian and Macedonian churches were giving their brethren in Christ a gift of their own goodwill, showing them a “favor,” as it were, out of Christian love and concern. The money itself, carried and delivered by Paul, Titus, and others, was deemed to be a χάρις from them, or as the Bauer-Danker-Arndt-Gingrich lexicon (BDAG) puts it, “a practical application of goodwill, (*a sign of*) *favor, gracious deed/gift, benefaction.*”

### **Χάρις as *grace* that God has toward or bestows on man**

In studying this particular and most frequent usage of the word, I wondered if any distinction might exist. Might χάρις at times refer to the innate kindness and undeserved love that God has as an attribute of His glory? Might it refer more specifically to God’s grace in action, that is, in granting an undeserved gift or benefit? The Greek lexicons commonly used in our exegetical work have made some attempt to discern and describe variation in the New Testament usage of χάρις. BDAG, for example, offers the following listing of definitions, with suggested glosses put in italics:

1. A winning quality or attractiveness that invites a favorable reaction, *graciousness, attractiveness, charm, winsomeness.*
2. A beneficent disposition toward someone, *favor, grace, gracious care/help, goodwill*—a. act., that which one grants to another, the action of one who volunteers to do something not otherwise

obligatory. . . . Esp. of the beneficent intention of God and of Christ; b. pass., that which one experiences from another.

3. Practical application of goodwill, (*a sign of*) *favor, gracious deed/gift, benefaction*—a. on the part of humans; b. on the part of God and Christ; the context will show whether the emphasis is upon the *possession of divine favor* as a source of blessings for the believer, or upon a *store of favor* that is dispensed, or a *favored status* (i.e. standing in God’s favor) that is brought about, or a *gracious deed* wrought by God in Christ, or a *gracious work* that grows from more to more.
4. Exceptional effect produced by generosity, *favor*.
5. Response to generosity or beneficence, *thanks, gratitude*.

The definitions and glosses of 2 and 3 above would be most applicable to the use of χάρις as an attribute of or action of God.

Thayer’s lexicon takes a somewhat different approach in what is defined as variation in the meaning of χάρις:

1. properly, that which affords joy, pleasure, delight, *sweetness, charm, loveliness*.
2. *good-will, loving-kindness, favor*: in a broad sense [both of God and man]; χάρις is used of the kindness of a master towards his inferiors or servants, and so especially of God towards men. . . . Moreover, the word χάρις contains the idea of *kindness which bestows upon one what he has not deserved*. . . . The N. T. writers use χάρις pre-eminently of that kindness by which God bestows favors even upon the ill-deserving, and grants to sinners the pardon of their offences, and bids them accept of eternal salvation through Christ. . . ; it is styled the ‘*grace of Christ*’ in that through pity for sinful men Christ left His state of blessedness with God in heaven, and voluntarily underwent the hardships and miseries of human life, and by His sufferings and death procured salvation for mankind. . . . χάρις is used of *the merciful kindness by which God, exerting his holy influence upon souls, turns them to Christ, keeps, strengthens, increases them in Christian faith, knowledge, affection, and kindles them to the exercise of the Christian virtues*. . . .
3. *what is due to grace*.
4. *thanks* (for benefits, services, favors).

With either lexicon and with others like them, distinctions are made from a study of the context in which χάρις is used. At times the meaning seems to be broad; in other occurrences it refers to something more specific. Examples of both can be found throughout the New Testament.

John 1:14 *And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.*

The “glory” of Christ is said to be “full of grace and truth.” *Grace* could here refer to the undeserved love and kindness of our Savior as an evident, even dominant attribute of His glory that He demonstrated during His earthly ministry.

John 1:16 *And of His fullness we have all received, and grace for grace.*

Here the usage seems to be more specific than an attitude of kindness that Jesus showed to His disciples. The writer John has all Christian disciples in mind, not just the Twelve, when he says “grace for grace” (χάρις ἀντὶ χάριτος). Again and again they (we) all have experienced yet another effect of, another benefit of, another gift of the grace of Christ at work. Or as one exegete has put it, this grace comes forth to believers like waves on the seashore—one wave of grace coming to us after another. When the accusative χάρις is used as a direct object, it may have the distinction of a practical giving or doing that stems from God’s grace, especially when used with verbs that mean “receive” or “give.”

The undeserved aspect of χάρις we shall consider shortly. But first we highlight another feature of the word used in reference to divine grace at work. In many contexts χάρις goes beyond the disposition God has toward man. Titus 2:11, for example, says that the “*grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all people*” (ESV). χάρις can thus refer to action, giving, benefiting, even sacrifice that God does for man. We consider a few examples of such below.

2 Corinthians 8:9 For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich.

The “grace of Christ” is expressed here as something more than the Lord’s loving attitude toward sinners. The ὅτι clause after τὴν χάριν τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ specifies this “grace” as Christ giving up His richness to become poor (in His humiliation) so that His believers might become rich with salvation and eternal life.

Romans 5:15 But the free gift is not like the offense. For if by the one man’s offense many died, much more the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abounded to many.

The “grace of God” and the “grace” of Christ are the effective cause of the “free gift” of righteousness (justification) abounding to many. And as the rest of Romans 5 goes on to state, this grace will prevail in the giving of eternal life. “Moreover the law entered that the offense might abound. But where sin abounded, grace abounded much more, so that as sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom. 5:20-21).

Acts 11:23 When he [Barnabas] came and had seen the grace of God, he was glad, and encouraged them all that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord.

Barnabas had been sent to investigate the spread of the Gospel to the Hellenists in Antioch. Verse 23 says that he came there and saw the grace of God. How can one see God’s disposition toward people? Only by seeing what God has graciously *done* for or *given* to those people. In this context χάρις apparently refers to the grace of conversion and sanctification that God had worked among the Hellenists in that city.

Acts 14:3 Therefore they stayed there [Iconium] a long time, speaking boldly in the Lord, who was bearing witness to the word of His grace, granting signs and wonders to be done by their hands.

Acts 20:24 “But none of these things move me [Paul]; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.”

Acts 20:32 “So now, brethren, I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.”

Since the “grace” of God is such a prominent feature of the Gospel, χάρις is here combined with λόγος and εὐαγγέλιον. The “gospel” is not only the “word” that portrays the undeserved love God has for all people; it also dispenses the gifts of salvation that this love has procured for us.

Ephesians 2:8-9 For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast.

It was the “grace” of God that led to the “gift of God,” namely, our salvation through faith. This salvation, including the very existence of saving faith in our hearts, was not “of works”; it was never something we earned for ourselves or accomplished in any way within ourselves.

Romans 3:23-24 For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

Justification is dispensed “freely by the grace” of God at the expense of Christ. This passage and Ephesians 2 previously cited offer a context in which the *active benefiting* of grace and the *undeserved nature* of grace both stand out. The Epistle to the Romans, we should note, has several contexts that show “grace” in stark contrast to merit, debt, wages, and works.

Romans 4:4 Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt.

Romans 11:6 And if by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it is of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work.

χάρις is put in contrast with ὀφείλημα to illustrate the point that χάρις can never be used to describe the “wage” or reward that a person earns. Wages must be considered as something owed to the one who works. Only that which is unmerited, undeserved can rightly be termed as “grace.” In both passages above the apostle specifies “grace” as the very opposite of works. The difference lies in the

aspects of merited vs. unmerited. Works deserve reward. Grace, on the other hand, gives freely to those who have not deserved anything at all.

Romans 6:1 *What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?*

The *undeserved* feature of grace comes out in this passage too. Paul rejects an idea that seems to have surfaced in his day (ours too). Perhaps some at that time were suggesting that they sin all the more so that grace could overflow in abundance. An abundance of sin, it was reasoned, would amplify the fact that God's grace was truly undeserved—we keep on sinning more and more, and God keeps on forgiving more and more. Paul, of course, had to reject this thinking as blatant abuse and misuse of divine grace. Cf. also Romans 6:15: “*What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? Certainly not!*”

Galatians 5:4 *You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace.*

Paul again contrasts law and grace—this time pointing out a danger. Self-righteousness or work-righteousness will have the deadly effect of causing a person to lose the standing of grace (undeserved favor in Christ) as the relationship that he has with God.

2 Corinthians 6:1 *We then, as workers together with Him also plead with you not to receive the grace of God in vain.*

What Paul sums up as “the grace of God” in this verse is the rich Gospel content expressed in 2 Corinthians 5:18-21: “*Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God. For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.*”

Χάρις as *divine grace at work* for or in believers

We praise God for His grace—His amazing willingness to give up His Son into death that we might be saved from our sin. We praise Christ for His grace—His willingness to give up His life that He might redeem us as His own. In the same vein we can note how the New Testament uses χάρις to define and describe the “*merciful kindness by which God, exerting his holy influence upon souls, turns them to Christ, keeps, strengthens, and increases them in Christian faith, knowledge, and love, and kindles in them the exercise of Christian virtues*” (Thayer 666). Thus we find the word “grace” in contexts where the New Testament record is speaking of the Christian's conversion and sanctification.

Even from eternity it was divine χάρις that elected or chose us to be adopted into God's family of believers, as the next two passages attest.

Romans 11:5 *Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace.*

Paul refers to a “remnant” of Jewish believers in his day as the result of God's “election of grace,” His choosing them to be His own and converting them to saving faith in Christ. As indicated by the use of χάρις, their election and conversion were entirely a free gift, not something they in any way deserved to receive or experience. And so Paul goes on to say: “*And if by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace*” (Rom. 11:6a).

Ephesians 1:5-6 *Having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He has made us accepted in the Beloved.*

2 Timothy 1:9 [God] *has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began.*

God is to be praised and glorified because of His grace, which predestined us to be adopted as His children through faith in Christ. This grace of election, bringing to pass the event of our being called to faith, was done and “given to us in Christ Jesus before time began” (πρὸ χρόνων αἰωνίων).



The same grace that elected believers from eternity has continued to work in the course of time, bringing about the conversion of each elect individual. In support of this truth are several contexts in which χάρις is used in reference to the divine gift of Christian faith.

Acts 18:27 *And when he [Apollos] desired to cross to Achaia, the brethren wrote, exhorting the disciples to receive him; and when he arrived, he greatly helped those who had believed through grace.*

The New Testament record indicates that “grace” (divine χάρις) was the instrument causing these Christians to believe. Acts 18:27 above and other passages too can help one see the Scriptural basis for the concept expressed by the term “means of grace.” We come to believe and continue to believe only by the grace of God that is brought to us in the Gospel and is at work in us through the Gospel. Acts 20:32, previously quoted, says that “the word of His grace . . . is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.” Cf. also Colossians 1:5-6: “*Because of the hope which is laid up for you in heaven, of which you heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel, which has come to you, as it has also in all the world, and is bringing forth fruit, as it is also among you since the day you heard and knew the grace of God in truth.*” In our use of the term *means of grace* the sense of grace is two-fold: a) The grace of the Holy Spirit at work in the heart and b) the grace of what is proclaimed and offered, the forgiveness of sins and salvation won through the atoning work of Christ.

Galatians 1:6 *I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel.*

When the New Testament uses a form of κλέω in the Epistles (cf. 2 Tim. 1:9 above), it means an *effective calling*, either to faith or to ministry. For the Galatian believers God accomplished a work of grace when He converted them, as He does with all those who have saving faith in Christ.

Ephesians 2:4-5 *But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved).*

Though we were “dead” in sin, God “made us alive” with faith, performing a spiritual resurrection in the heart. In this context of conversion Paul makes a parenthetical remark: “By grace you have been saved,” referring not only to the Christian’s justification before God, but also to the fact that God saved him from spiritual death through the “grace” of conversion.

The grace that elected and converted the believer continues to work for the believer’s benefit day by day. And so we hear the apostle speak of the fact that we “stand” in God’s grace. Based on such passages, theologians have coined the term *status gratiae*, “state of grace,” to describe the “*spiritual condition of one governed by the power of divine grace*” (Thayer 666).

Romans 5:2 *Through whom [Jesus Christ] also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.*

God’s undeserved love acting in our behalf is a refuge in which we “stand” securely, knowing that the same grace that procured our peace with God in Christ (Rom. 5:1) is freely accessible for every other blessing we may need. This includes the victory of grace reigning “through righteousness to eternal life” as noted in the previous quotation of Romans 5:21.

Romans 6:14 *For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace.*

The grace under which we live by faith has become a daily force that breaks the dominion of sin and leads us to fight against the encroachment of sin into our life. For all who are “under grace,” it can be no other way.

1 Peter 5:12 *This is the true grace of God in which you stand.*

The preceding verses (1 Pet. 5:8-11) speak of the apostle’s exhortation and prayer that his readers remain steadfast in the faith into which they were called. The idea of standing calls to mind a word picture that portrays our ongoing status as believers. We “stand” by faith (rather than fall in unbelief) only because of the solid ground underneath, the grace of God that holds us up. What Paul and Peter both write in their epistles has always been the plea to God’s people, namely, that they “*continue in the grace of God*” (Acts 13:43) and that they “*grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*” (2 Pet.3:18).

Thus we can also look to a number of passages that recognize χάρις as a power to preserve faith and also to impel the Christian to bear various fruits of faith. Paul speaks of such “grace” in connection with our Christian sanctification.

Romans 12:6-8 *Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, let us prophesy in proportion to our faith; or ministry, let us use it in our ministering; he who teaches, in teaching; he who exhorts, in exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.*

The grace of God is the reason why we have the various talents and abilities that we have, which are gifts (χαρίσματα) that we put into the service of our Lord and His kingdom work.

1 Corinthians 1:4-5 *I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given to you by Christ Jesus, that you were enriched in everything by Him in all utterance and all knowledge.*

The grace given to the Corinthian believers is defined in verse 5: They were “enriched in everything by Him in all utterance and all knowledge.” Their knowledge of the truth, for example, was a gift of grace.

2 Corinthians 1:12 *For our boasting is this: the testimony of our conscience that we conducted ourselves in the world in simplicity and godly sincerity, not with fleshly wisdom but by the grace of God, and more abundantly toward you.*

Paul attributed his godly conduct not at all to the wisdom of human nature, but to a far greater power at work in his heart and life—the grace of God, which worked abundantly in his dealings with the Corinthian congregation.

2 Corinthians 8:1-4 *Moreover, brethren, we make known to you the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia: that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded in the riches of their liberality. For I bear witness that according to their ability, yes, and beyond their ability, they were freely willing, imploring us with much urgency that we should receive the gift (χάρις) and the fellowship of the ministering to the saints.*

Paul testified to the grace of God at work in Christian sanctification by pointing to the Macedonian churches. God had, shall we say, *graced* them with the necessary gifts, both material and spiritual, which then resulted in their exemplary and generous giving to the famine-stricken believers in Judea. They had given liberally to the Judean Christians after God had given ultra-liberally to them. That is, the grace of God had given them their faith in Christ, brought them together as the churches of Christ, and then continued a transforming influence of the Spirit, who was producing in them all the fruits of faith that Paul mentioned.

2 Corinthians 9:8 *And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work.*

This verse occurs in the same stewardship context of 2 Corinthians 8 above. The “grace of God” will continually supply to all believers (in Macedonia, in Corinth, in the USA) whatever is needed (faith, compassion, love, material wealth, godly desire) to help believers serve their Lord and do His will.

1 Peter 4:10 *As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.*

In reference to this verse BDAG says: “The χάρις of God manifests itself in various χαρίσματα.” Though the same grace of God is at work in all believers, it dispenses gifts that vary from person to person.

1 Peter 5:10 *But may the God of all grace, who called us to His eternal glory by Christ Jesus, after you have suffered a while, perfect, establish, strengthen, and settle you.*

When Peter prays for the spiritual preservation of his readers, he recognizes the “God of all grace” as the One to hear this prayer and respond to it according to the needs of His people. God had the grace to call them to faith in Christ, and the grace to preserve and strengthen them in that faith, and the grace to bring each one of them to the final goal of eternal life. If another undeserved favor was necessary for His people, God had “all the grace” to grant it.

1 Peter 1:13 *Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest your hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.*

The “grace . . . at the revelation” of Christ is our entrance into the glory of heaven, the last act of grace that God will perform.

### **Χάρις as *divine grace applied in the apostolic ministry of Paul***

Throughout his Epistles Paul makes a point of stating that his call and his labors in the ministry were conducted and blessed entirely by the grace of God, as we see in the passages below.

1 Corinthians 3:10 *According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it.*

Paul knew that his work as one laying “the foundation,” i.e., his Gospel ministry that led to the founding of many Christian congregations, was carried out and prospered by divine grace. Paul was sensitive to this grace because of his prior history as a persecutor of Christians and a work-righteous Pharisee. What better and more glaring example of grace could there be—that God would set His sights on a Church-destroyer, convert such an unworthy man, and then use him mightily as a Church-builder! Paul alludes to this very thing in the next example.

1 Corinthians 15:9-10 *For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.*

Paul sees grace at work, not only in the fact that he believed in Christ, not only in the fact that a persecutor of God’s Church was called to be an apostle to God’s Church, but also in the fact that he labored more abundantly than his fellow apostles. Yet it was not his effort, he said, but the grace of God that was working in him. Cf. also what Paul said about his ministry in Galatians 1:15-16: “*But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother’s womb and called me through His grace, to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles. . . .*”

Ephesians 3:7-8 *Of which [the gospel] I became a minister according to the gift of the grace of God given to me by the effective working of His power. To me, who am less than the least of all the saints, this grace was given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ.*

In realizing his own unworthiness (“less than the least of all the saints”), the apostle was ever impressed with such grace that favored him with the privilege of preaching Christ crucified to the Gentiles. May we likewise have the same amazement over the same grace that favors us and works through us in our own Gospel ministries.

### **Χάρις used with the meaning of *thanks or credit***

In a few contexts the word χάρις has a sense other than “undeserved love or favor,” especially when it’s used as the direct object of ἔχω. For instance, Jesus said in Luke 17:9, “*Does he thank (ἔχει χάριν) that servant because he did the things that were commanded him?*” Other examples occur without the use of a finite verb. Typically it’s something like χάρις τῷ θεῷ, which is translated: “Thanks (be) to God.” Cf. 1 Corinthians 15:57, 2 Corinthians 2:14, 8:16, and 9:15. The idea of thanks that χάρις occasionally expresses can be linked in part to the fact that εὐχαριστέω, to *give thanks*, is based on the same root. And the extended meaning of “thanks” flows quite naturally from the basic meaning of “grace” or “favor.” When one does you a favor, gratitude compels you to speak your thanks.

Even rarer would be the usage of χάρις in Luke 6:32-34: “*But if you love those who love you, what credit (χάρις) is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit (χάρις) is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you hope to receive back, what credit (χάρις) is that to you? For even sinners lend to sinners to receive as much back.*” The translation above is New King James. One could offer a paraphrase to show that χάρις here used is not far from its basic meaning of “goodwill”: If you love or do good to those who love or do good to you, what quality of goodwill or graciousness can we credit to you? It could be argued, then, that χάρις in the verses above still retains part of its basic sense, i.e., acting to help on the

basis of undeserved kindness (on a human to human level) rather than on the basis of quid pro quo (“I scratch your back; you scratch mine”).

Another example, somewhat different, is the use of χάρις in 1 Peter 2:19-20: “*For this is commendable (χάρις), if because of conscience toward God one endures grief, suffering wrongfully. For what credit (χάρις) is it if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable (χάρις) before God.*” BDAG states that this occurrence of χάρις is used “by metonymy” to denote “*that which brings someone (God’s) favor or wins a favorable response from God.*” But even so, one could still say that the Christian is being gracious, albeit in a passive sense.

In closing summary several assertions can be made about the usage of χάρις in the Greek New Testament.

\* When used in the context of divine grace, χάρις describes the love and kindness of God that favors the recipient with blessing that he does not deserve, especially in granting the gift of salvation through Jesus Christ. God’s grace in all its manifestations is never based on human merit.

\* In many contexts χάρις denotes the grace of God doing or giving something for our benefit. This idea is prominent in passages that speak of justification and also of sanctification. χάρις is, therefore, more than a kind feeling God has toward us, although we recognize the undeserved love in God as the sole basis for the action or the gift from God.

\* When consulting a Greek lexicon, remember that the editor’s suggested meaning is just that—a suggestion. Context must decide if any distinct flavor of the word is intended to be understood.

\* Grace as the New Testament portrays it is truly unique, non-existent in the characteristics of sinful human nature, yet quite prominent in the attributes of God’s nature. It is, in fact, the attribute that makes the holy God who should condemn us be the Savior God who redeems and adopts us as His dear children. This undeserved love from above, demonstrated in the person and work of Jesus Christ, will always be the basis of our peace with God and our hope of eternal life. It is our constant prayer that by His grace God would help us to make that same grace be the prominent truth that we preach, teach, witness, and counsel in our ministry.

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## **The Proper Understanding of Matthew 5:32, Matthew 19:9, and Luke 16:18 in Their Relation to Marriage, Divorce, and Remarriage**

Michael Roehl

### **Introduction<sup>1</sup>**

In the pastoral ministry few problems consume as much time and energy and evoke such heartache and frustration as those times when sin invades God’s perfect marriage arrangement. The problem, of course, is neither the plan nor the One who devised it. God’s plan for marriage is as edifying and fulfilling as it is simple: one man, one woman, joined together for life—with the wife submitting to the headship that God demands of the husband, and the husband practicing a self-sacrificing, outward-directed love for his wife wherein he considers her needs and well-being above his own.

As good as God's plan is, however, man invariably denigrates and dishonors all that he touches. The focus of this essay will therefore be on the Word and will of God that is in effect once man has done what God has told him not to do. We will focus on God's will as man seeks to pick up the pieces of lives shattered by a sinful abuse of God's plan for marriage, especially in the area of divorce and its aftermath.

In this endeavor, however, we must proceed with great caution. Discussing divorce and remarriage before the fact can feel like handing a contraceptive to a teenager and telling him, "*Don't fornicate; but when you do. . .*" As is true when discussing God's view of suicide with a person who is depressed, so also in a discussion on marriage and divorce, it can be dangerous to the point of recklessness to discuss resolution of the aftermath even before the sin has taken place. To the one contemplating suicide our counsel is that it would be a great and grievous sin and would place one directly in the crosshairs of God's divine wrath and punishment. Ill-advised would be any discussion of possible exceptions. So it is also with marriage and divorce. God's under-shepherds do not serve our Master well by pointing out doors of opportunity by which sinful people can avoid the struggles inherent in every marriage. Rather, we serve faithfully by emphasizing God's *one man-one woman-for life* plan for marriage. Let this continue to be a given among us.

That said, God's representatives also plan wisely for the worst even as they pray for and promote the best. Divorce is a tragic fact of life among us. Therefore those called to shepherd others would be foolish not to master also God's will and prescribed course of action when sin invades His perfect plan. We too must take to heart God's warning in Jeremiah 23: "*Behold, I am against the prophets, declares the LORD, who use their tongues and declare, 'declares the LORD.' Behold, I am against those who prophesy lying dreams, declares the LORD, and who tell them and lead my people astray by their lies and their recklessness, when I did not send them or charge them. So they do not profit this people at all, declares the LORD*" (Jer. 23:31-32 ESV).<sup>2</sup>

There is also a great danger here in that we approach God's Word and will on this subject with either a preconceived idea of what we will find or with a bias that taints our judgment of what He has said. All pastors feel pressure to problem-solve, and all pastors have a natural tendency to say what hurting sinners want to hear. God alone must chart our course. His is the only will that counts, and so we begin this study by clearing our hearts and minds of that which we *hope* Scripture says, fall in great humility before our God and His Word, and pray simply: "*Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.*"

### **Defining the Specific Question**

Since the topic of marriage and divorce is obviously rather broad, we need to define the current question or issue. To this end it is helpful to define or identify the questions that are *not* under study. We are not, for example, questioning God's definition of marriage, nor are we seeking in any way to justify or encourage divorce. Divorce always involves sin, and as such can never be part of God's will for His children and the institution of marriage that He has put in place. We are not seeking to restudy the passages that speak on this subject in order to find a clever loophole that will allow man to follow the sinful dictates of his corrupt heart with impunity. We are not seeking to use these passages to justify what God has condemned. We are not, finally, by the very fact of this study giving indication that anything other than forgiveness and reconciliation are in all but very specific cases God's will for those who encounter difficulties after they enter the "one flesh" relationship that God Himself has ordained.

With this understood, it is profitable for us as pastors to know how to counsel our members in the matter of God's will when divorce becomes a reality. Therefore our central question is: *When, if ever, is a divorced man or woman free to remarry?*

### **Specific Passages under Study**

The original essay assignment was limited to a study of the following passage, Matthew 19:9: "*And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery*" (ESV). This translation, like the NIV, NAS, and others, is based on the Nestle-Aland text: λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι ὃς ἂν ἀπολύσῃ τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ μὴ ἐπὶ πορνείᾳ καὶ γαμήσῃ ἄλλην μοιχᾶται. My

assumption here is that the New King James translation better identifies the full question that prompted the assignment: ***“And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery.”*** A key difference, of course, is the additional clause at the end of the verse, which is present in both the Majority Text and the Textus Receptus; on the latter the NKJ translation is based. The additional clause is underlined in the Majority Text wording that follows:

λέγω δὲ ὑμῖν ὅτι ὃς ἂν ἀπολύσῃ τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ, μὴ ἐπὶ πορνεία, καὶ γαμήσῃ ἄλλην, μοιχᾶται· καὶ ὁ ἀπολελυμένην γαμήσας μοιχᾶται.

Where one stands in the area of textual criticism will in large part determine which Greek text he believes reflects the original. Since both readings are fairly well attested (with internal and external evidence to support each) and since we follow a hermeneutical principle that no doctrine of Scripture can be established only on the basis of a variant reading, we also include two other passages in this discussion. The first is Matthew 5:32: ***“But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery”*** (ESV). Note that the NKJ translation of this verse indicates that the second part of the passage does not represent a variant reading or disputed text: ***“But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife for any reason except sexual immorality causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a woman who is divorced commits adultery”*** (NKJ). Nestle-Aland, Majority Text, and the Textus Receptus all have the last clause, which is underlined below in the Majority Text (BYZ) wording of verse 32:

ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω ὑμῖν, ὅτι ὃς ἂν ἀπολύσῃ τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ παρεκτὸς λόγου πορνείας, ποιεῖ αὐτὴν μοιχᾶσθαι· καὶ ὃς ἂν ἀπολελυμένην γαμήσῃ μοιχᾶται.

A similar clause is found also in the third passage under discussion. In citing Luke 16:18 below, we consider both the ESV and NKJ translations and the Greek texts from which they are rendered.

***“Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery”*** (ESV).

Πᾶς ὁ ἀπολύων τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ καὶ γαμῶν ἑτέραν μοιχεύει, καὶ ὁ ἀπολελυμένην ἀπὸ ἀνδρὸς γαμῶν μοιχεύει (N-A).

***“Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced from her husband commits adultery”*** (NKJ).

Πᾶς ὁ ἀπολύων τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ καὶ γαμῶν ἑτέραν μοιχεύει· καὶ πᾶς ὁ ἀπολελυμένην ἀπὸ ἀνδρὸς γαμῶν μοιχεύει (BYZ).<sup>3</sup>

## Background, Context, and Occasion for the Lord’s Words

Matthew in particular makes it clear that the words under study from chapter 19 were spoken in reply to a direct challenge from the Pharisees:

*And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?” He answered, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.” They said to him, “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?” He said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so” (Matt. 19:3-8).<sup>4</sup>*

This was a test on the part of the Pharisees in that they again tried to divide and conquer Jesus. They believed that the greatest hindrance to their plan to remove Him was in His popularity with the people. To counter this popularity, they sought to alienate one group or another against Him.

The plan of the Pharisees in Matthew 19 was fairly transparent. Had Jesus answered, “Yes, a man can divorce his wife for any cause,” He would have alienated the women. Had He just said, “No, a man may not divorce his wife for any cause,” then in the minds of the Pharisees this would at least diminish His popularity among the men.

In the answer Jesus gave in Matthew 19, He did more than deal with the opposition wisely. He established several truths pertinent to the matter of marriage and divorce.

1. Once a man and a woman enter the estate of marriage, they are no longer regarded as two but one. This union is a profound mystery, which only God understands completely.<sup>5</sup> (“*Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.*”)
2. Divorce is never God’s will in connection with His original marriage plan; thus sin (lawlessness) is always involved in divorce. (“*. . . but from the beginning it was not so.*”)
3. Jesus again established the Scriptures as the only authoritative norm for man’s questions. (“*Have you not read. . .*”)

As with His “*Render to Caesar . . . and to God*” answer to the test in Matthew 22, so here too Jesus answers masterfully without falling into the trap of His enemies. More than that, by His answer He kicks out from beneath them the crutch on which they had sinfully been leaning for centuries and by which they had artificially justified their sinful actions. In effect He was telling them: *The fact that Moses made legal provision for your sinful actions cannot be used as justification for your ongoing sin. From the beginning divorce was a sinful perversion of God’s perfect plan, and that is still true today.*

### **God’s Divine Guidance**

It bears repeating that the direction of our counseling in connection with marital discord should always be toward forgiveness and reconciliation. We need constant reminders toward this end, given the temptation to regard every case as exceptional. The every-case-is-an-exception mentality compromises or renders impotent that which should be our primary counsel. The difficulty here is compounded by the fact that forgiveness and reconciliation require much more effort than the alternatives. They require Christian virtues that will always be in conflict with the natural inclinations of our old Adam. We should never regard God’s will as impractical or obsolete in any way, nor should we yield to our natural tendencies toward laziness and choosing the path of least resistance. Again, forgiveness and reconciliation take work, while the alternatives often hold a subtle allure for the sinful flesh, which gravitates constantly toward the thought of a fresh start or something new and exciting, or to pridefulness, stubbornness, self-centeredness, yielding to desires for vengeance, etc. Human nature forever longs for what is forbidden and strives for what is denied.

While forgiveness and reconciliation are the goal, sin continues to taint or destroy all that is good in God’s creation. Divorce is a fact of life in virtually every culture and at every time in history. Jesus acknowledged this sad reality in Matthew 19:8: “*Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.*” In a paraphrase of this verse Luther recognized the same problems in his day:

He [Jesus] answers (Matt. 19:8): “For your hard hearts Moses allowed you to divorce your wives. It is still not a good thing to do; but since you are such wicked and unmanageable people, it is better to grant you this much than to let you do worse by vexing or murdering each other or by living together in incessant hate, discord, and hostility.” This same thing might even be advisable nowadays, if the secular government prescribed it, that certain . . . stubborn, and obstinate people, who have no capacity for toleration and are not suited for married life at all, should be permitted to get a divorce. Since people are as evil as they are, any other way of governing is impossible. Frequently something must be tolerated even though it is not a good thing to do, to prevent something even worse from happening.<sup>6</sup>

It is a gross understatement to say that the same problems that have always existed are prevalent also in our day. Divorce is rampant and casual, perhaps more so than at any other time in history. This fact creates more than one problem for God’s people. Once society rejects God’s counsel in any area of life, those who still teach and practice the so-called “old ways” are routinely ostracized and ridiculed.

Compare our observance of close Communion and how much more offensive it has become to visitors, even in the last decade or two. It will only get worse as this godly practice grows ever smaller in society's rearview mirror. This serves as a warning that any counsel which differs from society's current permissiveness toward divorce and remarriage will meet with substantial headwinds, if not outright scorn and rejection. This reality, however, cannot be allowed to divert us from whatever path God has laid out for us in his Word. The identification of that path is, in fact, the central theme of this essay assignment.

### Truths Universally Accepted in Our Fellowship

To my knowledge the following truths are nowhere disputed among us:

1. God's original plan for marriage is that it was to end only in the death of one or both spouses.

Romans 7:2-3 *For a married woman is bound by law to her husband while he lives, but if her husband dies she is released from the law of marriage. Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress.*

2. Scripture allows (but does not command) divorce in the cases of adultery or malicious desertion. This is demonstrated from the following passages:

Matthew 19:9 *"And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery."*

1 Corinthians 7:15 *But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace.*

3. The innocent party in a divorce, i.e., the one who did not commit the adultery or malicious desertion, is free to remarry without sin, but only when the marriage has truly been broken through adultery or malicious desertion.

Matthew 5:32 *"But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery."*

1 Corinthians 7:15 *(See same verse above).*

4. God, not the government, ultimately determines when a marriage begins and also when it has ended. While Christians obey the laws of the land also in connection with marriage, that institution has been ordained and instituted by *God* and is ultimately regulated by Him alone.

### The Specific Questions under Study

While Scripture is always clear in its teachings, we in our hearts and minds are not always clear on what Scripture teaches. The problem undoubtedly lies with us, not with God's Word. Thus Christians of all generations have struggled as they seek to know and follow God's will in the area of remarriage after divorce. The Roman Catholic Church has skirted the issue by declaring, on the one hand, that no divorced person can remarry; and yet, on the other hand, it has determined that (for the right price) an individual can obtain an annulment from the church. That annulment says, in effect, that the marriage never took place—in which case the individuals involved are free to remarry because the Roman Catholic Church has declared that they were never married in the first place. Clever perhaps, but certainly not Scriptural. In fact, it is reminiscent of some of the legal contrivances established by the Jews in Bible times to circumvent God's Word and will in their day.

The key to dealing with questions relating to divorce and remarriage is to bear in mind *that it is God alone who determines when a marriage begins, and—more to the point—when it has come to an end.* Failure to hold this central truth in mind will invariably cause confusion when dealing with the passages under study. These are printed again, with the Nestle-Aland text also provided for two of them.

Matthew 5:32 *"But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery"* (ESV).



ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω ὑμῖν, ὅτι ὃς ἂν ἀπολύσῃ τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ, παρεκτὸς λόγου πορνείας, ποιῇ αὐτὴν μοιχεῖσθαι· καὶ ὃς ἂν ἀπολελυμένην γαμήσῃ μοιχᾶται.

Matthew 19:9 “*And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery*” (ESV).

Luke 16:18 “*Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery*” (ESV).

Πᾶς ὁ ἀπολύων τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ καὶ γαμῶν ἑτέραν μοιχεύει, καὶ ὁ ἀπολελυμένην ἀπὸ ἀνδρὸς γαμῶν μοιχεύει.

It is important to note that Scripture routinely uses the word “divorce” (ἀπολύων) in a legal sense.<sup>7</sup> The same is true of ἀποστάσιον, which refers to the issuing of a certificate of divorce. That means that when we read the word “divorce” in Scripture, we are to think only of a society’s disposition or view of a marriage, never God’s view. The use of the word, in and of itself, gives no indication as to whether or not a marriage bond has been broken in God’s eyes. For this reason it is critical that pastors counsel their members to look at marriage with the eyes of faith and with an understanding governed by Scripture—to see the marriage as God sees it and to act accordingly. The pivotal question for them is this: *Does God regard us as married, i.e., as the one flesh He has joined together?* The answer is always yes, unless one spouse has died, or unless either spouse has destroyed the marriage bond through adultery or desertion.

Let us understand also that we are not to regard adultery and desertion as some sort of legal means to a desired end, which according to God’s plan is always supposed to be forgiveness and, wherever possible, reconciliation. In other words, Jesus is here stating a fact rather than a legality: *A spouse is not bound in a marriage where the other is guilty of adultery or desertion because the former marriage bond no longer exists in God’s sight.* Adultery and desertion are not get-out-of-marriage-free cards; they are real sins that end real marriages. Forgiveness on the part of the innocent spouse may well lead to reconciliation, but that is not a scriptural requirement that God places on the one who has been wronged. More to the point here, however, is the difficulty of seeing how the *offending spouse* can be truly repentant if he or she rejects the reconciliation sought by the innocent spouse. If the couple does reconcile, the reconciliation needs to be formalized by re-establishing the marriage vows between the couple whose marriage bond had been broken by sin. This establishes the fact that once reconciled, the above-mentioned past sins cannot be held in reserve, to be used at a later date as grounds for divorce by the offended party. This is true, of course, because God again sees the marriage bond as intact following the reconciliation.

Much of the fog that clouds the issue of remarriage after divorce will fade away when we regard the word “divorce” as a strictly legal term that has no bearing on God’s determined reality. The passages under study here are then a basic statement that man’s actions do not alter God’s reality. Whenever man acts as though they do, he sins—in this case by committing adultery.

Note especially in the Matthew 5 passage above how even the innocent party “commits adultery” through the sinful, legal actions (i.e., divorce) of her husband.<sup>8</sup> This is true even though our Lord mentions no subsequent actions on her part to remarry or to engage in sexual intercourse. Greek grammar and syntax create some challenges for us here. μοιχευθῆναι is an aorist passive infinitive verb from μοιχεύω (to *commit adultery*). Rightly translating or even understanding the concept of an aorist passive verb for “commit adultery” poses a problem. Lenski seeks to address the problem with his translation: “*brings about that she is stigmatized as an adulteress,*” to which he adds this comment:

This is even an aorist passive: . . . by his ποιεῖν he forces his wife out of the marriage. She who according to the Commandment: [“You shall not commit adultery”], ought to be in her marriage, is now, contrary to the Commandment, outside of it, by the wicked action of her husband. . . .

A further complication is due to our helplessness in translating this passive infinitive . . . into English. We have no passive for the active “to commit adultery.” But this is no justification for translating these two passives as if they were really actives, like the two actives in v. 27-28. Since

our English fails us here, we must express the two passive forms as best we can to bring out the passive sense of the Greek forms.<sup>9</sup>

Many commentators have simply opted to translate the passive verb as if it were an active, and then to add a parenthetical idea to clear up any confusion. Examples of such are similar to the following translation and parenthetical remark: “*He makes her commit adultery (when she remarries).*”<sup>10</sup> In opposition Lenski again offers comment: “But this parenthesis is wrong. When is this woman made what Jesus says? The moment her husband drives her out, whether she ever marries again or not. What if women like this eventually married again, they were made μοιχευθῆναι the very moment they were driven out. . . . Of what is the woman guilty? Jesus has no indictment against her.”<sup>11</sup>

Jesus’ statement in Matthew 5:32 is therefore not a guide for remarriage following divorce, but a commentary on the effects of sinful divorce as it relates to all parties involved. The innocent spouse is driven from a marriage and stigmatized as adulterous, as is anyone who later marries a wrongfully divorced person. As with much of the Sermon on the Mount, the passage is a proclamation of the moral law of God; it is Jesus telling the Jews: *Don’t do this, because this is the reality of your actions.*

The inevitable question that follows is whether or not the innocent party—namely, a husband or wife whose spouse has divorced him or her for other than Scriptural reasons—is free to remarry. In answer we cannot repeat often enough that Christians are to operate on the basis of God’s truth, not man’s. If a man divorces his wife for an unscriptural reason, *she is still married to him in God’s eyes and she should act accordingly.* Obviously, at some point the husband will have broken the marriage in God’s eyes by desertion (or perhaps adultery), and at that point the innocent party would be free to remarry. The stigma of the spouse’s sinful actions, however, remains upon the innocent spouse and any future marriage partner.

As we turn once more to Luke 16:18, we note below that Jesus uses the present active indicative μοιχεύει rather than the passive. The verse seems to stand alone in its context (Luke 16:14-31), but the same basic truths are nevertheless conveyed.

“*Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery*” (ESV).

Πᾶς ὁ ἀπολύων τὴν γυναῖκα αὐτοῦ καὶ γαμῶν ἑτέραν μοιχεύει· καὶ ὁ ἀπολελυμένην ἀπὸ ἀνδρὸς γαμῶν μοιχεύει.<sup>12</sup>

The issuance of a human document does not bind God at any point. Whenever one who is in God’s eyes still married to his first wife joins himself to another, he is committing adultery, as is the one who joins himself to a woman who is, again, in God’s eyes still married to her first husband.<sup>13</sup>

Jesus’ use of the present verb here, μοιχεύει, some find disconcerting, as though Scripture is here teaching us that the adultery is ongoing. It is indeed a frightening thought that one may be living for years in unrepentant sinfulness and therefore under God’s wrath and condemnation. Since the present indicative can be translated in a variety of ways, the use of the present tense alone is not enough to establish as a dogmatic truth that any and all who marry wrongfully divorced spouses are guilty of adultery perpetually.<sup>14</sup> At some point it must be acknowledged that the original marriage bond has been broken, either through adultery or desertion.

Time and circumstances surely play some role here. Not only is the marriage bond broken if the guilty spouse has sexual relations with another; at some point the one who has been wrongly divorced can rightly claim that the marriage has been broken also in God’s eyes through desertion. When the marriage bond has truly been broken in God’s sight and when true repentance has been expressed by those involved, including the desire to reconcile if possible, neither the injured party nor the guilty party is bound by the previous marriage bond.

A myriad of possible permutations further serves to cloud the basic truths outlined in God’s Word. Consider the case where a wife commits adultery, but subsequently repents, confesses her sin, and seeks both forgiveness from and reconciliation with her husband. The husband nonetheless files for divorce. Is he sinning by doing so? God’s Word gives no such indication. Is she free then to remarry, even though the marriage bond was broken by her own sinful actions? A broken marriage is a broken marriage. In God’s eyes the marriage bond no longer exists. So it would appear artificial to state categorically that

the innocent party may remarry, but not the one who sinned and repented. Again, time and circumstances certainly play some role. While the marriage bond has certainly been broken—in both the eyes of the state and in the eyes of God—yet it would undoubtedly be giving offense for the woman in that particular case to remarry quickly, especially to the one with whom she committed adultery. Time does not remove sin, but time does help to remove a potential cause of offense.

## Conclusion

In the passages under study in this essay, Scripture does not specifically address remarriage in connection with marriages that are truly broken in God's sight. Nor do these passages give specific forward-looking guidance for those whose original marriage bond has truly been broken. The idea that one must forever remain single following a divorce seems to have been imported from a different passage, which actually deals with a different set of circumstances.

*1 Corinthians 7:8-11 To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single as I am. But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion. To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife.*

Through the pen of Apostle Paul the Holy Spirit here addresses several specific issues. The general rule, as always, is that a husband and wife should not separate. Yet the Spirit also gives indication that exceptional circumstances will arise that will warrant special actions. If, for example, a woman is in an abusive marriage where she is routinely subjected to violence, no conscientious pastor would counsel her to remain in that situation. Such a situation would undoubtedly fall under Paul's "but if she does" statement concerning separation.

Much more germane to the topic of this paper—remarriage following divorce—is the Spirit's statement here: "To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single as I am. But if they cannot exercise self-control, they should marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion." This statement gives background and context to the Old Testament laws concerning divorce as well as to Jesus' statement, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives." God knows sinful mankind. Thus He knows our frailty, and while He can never be accused of making provision for our sin, He also cannot be accused of forcing a situation wherein man is tempted beyond what he is able to bear.

Our course of counseling therefore has been clearly outlined for us. Is the marriage bond still intact in God's eyes? Then God's desired course of action is for both parties to work toward maintaining and improving the marriage that exists. Has the marriage truly been broken? Then God desires repentance, forgiveness, and if possible, reconciliation. If reconciliation proves impossible, an innocent party is free to remarry as the Lord offers opportunity. At that point—following repentance and when the marriage bond has truly been broken in God's sight—we find nothing in Scripture that prevents the offending party from also remarrying. That said, Christians will certainly take great pains to avoid offense, which would almost certainly mean allowing some time to pass before either courtship or remarriage.

A conservative Lutheran church body published a study on this subject that included the following salient comment:

In the case of the spouse who sinfully ended a marriage by adultery or desertion, we first and foremost look for repentance. With repentance we also anticipate a genuine desire to restore the broken relationship, if possible. Should this be truly impossible, there seems to be no categorical prohibition that prevents the repentant person from remarrying. This assumes, however, that, as far as one can observe, the repentance is genuine and the attempt at reconciliation is equally genuine. In other words there can be no "planned" repentance, for that is no repentance at all. The repentant person must also have the intention of living a godly life in the new marriage bond.<sup>15</sup>

Christians want to avoid sin, for the renewed delight of our hearts, once we have put on the new man, is to follow God's Word and will in all things. As Christian pastors we will certainly counsel accordingly, including also in the areas of marriage, divorce, and remarriage. Yet while we counsel the ideal, we will also seek to follow God's Word when the less-than-the-ideal (sin) becomes a reality and taints or destroys God's perfect plans for His children. Our counsel must therefore never fall short of or go beyond that which God has told us to communicate. Failure to communicate God's Word accurately will result in either a justification of sin or an unnecessary binding of consciences, a tying of burdens upon wounded souls that they are unable to carry. Who is equal to such tasks? God grant us wisdom and courage as we seek to communicate His Word and will accurately and evangelically to those He has entrusted to our spiritual care.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The writer presented his original essay to the CLC West Central Pastoral Conference that met in September of 2011. It is here offered in a partially revised form, with the writer's footnotes converted to endnotes and additional endnotes (1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 10, 12, 13) provided by the editor.

<sup>2</sup> All references are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

<sup>3</sup> Note that the only variant here is the inclusion of  $\pi\acute{\alpha}\varsigma$  in the second clause, which does not substantially change the meaning of the verse.

<sup>4</sup> For the purpose and scope of this essay we will consider the account of Mark 10:2-12 as parallel, for the most part, to Matthew 19:3-9. There are a few differences between the two narratives. In particular note Mark 10:10-12: "In the house His disciples also asked Him again about the same matter. So He said to them, 'Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her. And if a woman divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery'" (NKJ).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Ephesians 5:31-32.

<sup>6</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 21, American Ed., trans. and ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1956) 94.

<sup>7</sup> The historical circumstances of the Lord's words to His original audience did involve rabbinical rulings ("the tradition of the elders") that the Jewish religious authorities had made binding on the people. In that sense their practice of divorce had thus become a legal matter.

<sup>8</sup> It was undoubtedly because women were not permitted under Jewish law to issue a certificate of divorce to their husbands that Jesus spoke only of a husband divorcing his wife. However, compare what the Lord said in Mark 10:12 (see endnote 4 above). Thus the same principles hold true in a society where either spouse can and does initiate divorce.

<sup>9</sup> R. C. H. Lenski, *Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel* (Columbus: Lutheran Book Concern, 1932) 226-27.

<sup>10</sup> E.g., in connection with Matt. 5:32 and its passive form  $\mu\omicron\iota\chi\epsilon\upsilon\theta\eta\iota\upsilon\alpha\iota$  the Bauer-Danker-Arndt-Gingrich lexicon (BDAG 3rd Ed.) has "he causes her to commit adultery (if she contracts a subsequent marriage)."

<sup>11</sup> Lenski 226.

<sup>12</sup> As indicated above in endnote 3, the Majority Text wording has  $\pi\acute{\alpha}\varsigma$  in the second clause.

<sup>13</sup> In the pastoral theology textbook, *The Shepherd Under Christ* (Armin Schuetze and Irwin Habeck; Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1974), the exegetical difficulty of Luke 16:18 is noted and treated in this way:

Jesus here is speaking against the Pharisees, who were attempting to justify their practices and were deriding him. The free manner in which marriage and divorce were viewed by them and accepted by all made everyone involved in such practice guilty. The man who married the woman who had been put away did so, not because he considered her innocent, but because he accepted these loose practices in regard to divorce. Under such circumstances everyone was guilty. A similar situation exists today when people freely marry, divorce, and remarry and accept that as perfectly proper, regardless of the reasons. When this occurs, all involved are guilty of adulterous action over against the biblical views of the marriage relationship. (292)

<sup>14</sup> It is not unreasonable to regard the use of the present indicative in this verse as a gnomic present or an aoristic present. A gnomic present is used to indicate a universal truth that is true at all times or a generic truth that is true at any time (D. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, p. 523). Or perhaps the present tense here, with an aoristic aspect, points to a result taking place; i.e., any time a man divorces his wife wrongfully, adultery occurs. Regardless of how one takes the force of the present verb here, the idea that marriage to a divorced person makes one guilty of ongoing sin cannot be established only on the use of the present indicative in this and other verses like it.

<sup>15</sup> *A Study of Marriage, Divorce, Malicious Desertion and Remarriage in the Light of God's Word*. Prepared under the auspices of the Conference of Presidents of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1990) 26.

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## Reformation Books in Review

**Gerald L. Bray, Editor: *Galatians, Ephesians: New Testament X—Reformation Commentary on Scripture* (General Editor Timothy George); IVP Academic, Downers Grove, Illinois; 2011; hard cover, 446 pages and 57 introductory pages.**

We have previously mentioned in the *Journal of Theology* (51:2) some mammoth projects taken on by InterVarsity Press; these are *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* and *Ancient Christian Texts*. With this commentary on Galatians and Ephesians we have the beginning of another giant series entitled *Reformation Commentary on Scripture*. Twenty-eight full-size volumes are projected, covering all the books of both Old and New Testaments.

This first volume to be published includes a 38-page general introduction to the whole set written by the general editor, Timothy George, and a 19-page introduction to this volume on Galatians and Ephesians. The contents for each volume will be taken from specific Bible commentaries written by individual Reformers, with the period of time covered by this series ranging from the late 1400s to the mid-seventeenth century. Much of the material has not been previously available in the English language. The authors chosen represent various confessional positions: Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican, Puritan, and Anabaptist. A few humanists who remained Roman Catholic are also included, such as Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam.

What will be particularly useful for confessional Lutherans, of course, are the exegetical comments of Martin Luther himself, as well as the writings of Philip Melancthon, Johannes Bugenhagen, Johannes Brenz, Caspar Cruciger, Erasmus Sarcerius, George Major, Jacob Andreae, Nikolaus Selnecker, Johannes Wigand, and Johann Gerhard. Many of the writings of the lesser known Lutheran leaders have been available only in Latin up to this time, and so we are happy that translators are now willing and able to make this material accessible to us.

As one would expect, the section on Galatians contains many excerpts from the two series of lectures Martin Luther gave on this epistle, one in 1519 and the other in 1535. Both of these have been translated in *Luther's Works*, Volumes 26-27. But in this volume we also have access to the exegetical comments of Johannes Brenz (1499-1570), whose commentary on Galatians was published shortly after Luther's death in 1546. The introduction has this to say about Brenz: "It is probably not too much to say that the preaching of Lutheran theology in Germany owed more to Brenz than to any other individual, and it is a great pity that his freshness and insight have not been more widely appreciated in recent times" (p. xlviii).

Another Lutheran commentator on Galatians who is represented on these pages is Erasmus Sarcerius, whose name I did not recognize (Franz Pieper's three-volume *Christian Dogmatics* does not mention him even once.). The introduction says of him: "His commentary on Paul appeared in 1542 and was clearly an attempt to demonstrate the biblical foundations of his systematic theology. . . . [W]hereas Sarcerius's theology was translated and widely read, his commentaries were not. They remained in Latin and were accessible only to . . . [those] who could follow the academic language" (p. xlviii).

Martin Luther wrote no commentaries on Ephesians, and so the section on Ephesians has nothing at all from him. But other Lutherans are represented, including Brenz and Sarcerius, and also Johannes Bugenhagen, Luther's pastor, as well as George Major, who lapsed into error by claiming that good works are necessary for salvation. His teaching on that point was condemned by the *Formula of Concord* of 1580.

To show that Brenz and Sarcerius were faithful to Luther's Reformation theology, included in this

review are a few quotations from this volume.

On Galatians 3:4 Brenz wrote: “We must not imagine that we are counted righteous in the sight of God because of the righteousness of our deeds or sufferings but only because of the righteousness of Christ” (p. 93). Likewise Brenz on Galatians 3:6: “Faith by itself is an imperfect work, just like any other good work done by human beings, but when it accepts Christ it is reckoned and counted as faith for perfect righteousness, not because of the value of the work but because of the Christ who has been received by that work of faith” (p. 95). On Jesus’ crucifixion he states: “Christ also took on himself the punishment that is the horror of hell, saying, ‘My God, why have you forsaken me?’” (p. 104).

Erasmus Sarcerius is known as a Gnesio-Lutheran who opposed the later errors of Philip Melancthon with reference to conversion. Sarcerius clearly gave glory to God for his salvation, including election and conversion, as the following quotations show. On Ephesians 1:4 he wrote: “In the same way, neither predestination nor justification nor our redemption would be certain if the causes of these things were in us” (p. 241). “The causes of this election are the love of God, grace and mercy” (p. 243). “The mistake is to place the causes of predestination in us, which error Jerome and many others have been guilty of” (p. 244). “Similarly, this emphasis on the overflowing grace of God reminds us that there is no reason to think that our works or merits are the causes of salvation . . .” (p. 247). “To be to the praise of God’s glory is to attribute praise and glory to God alone in the matter of salvation and to reject our works and merits as its cause” (p. 256). “The meaning of this passage [1:13] is that we have been saved by the ministry of the Word, which is effective through the Holy Spirit, who makes us certain of our salvation and seals us” (p. 258). In his commentary on the text of Ephesians 2:1-3 Sarcerius wrote: “Because they were dead in sins and children of wrath, he asserts that they have been delivered only by the love, grace and mercy of God” (p. 275).

Non-Lutherans are quoted more than Lutherans, but on many subjects what John Calvin and other Reformed leaders had to say is on the mark. Almost all the Reformers agreed in theory that we are justified by faith alone, apart from the deeds of the Law. They went astray chiefly on the teaching of the means of grace, God’s working through the Gospel in Word and Sacrament. They also did not have a correct understanding of the distinction between Law and Gospel.

We look forward to the twenty-seven commentaries yet to be published and especially to having access to the remarks of Brenz and Sarcerius.

**Johann Gerhard: *On the Ecclesiastical Ministry—Part Two (Theological Commonplaces: XXVI/2)*, translated by Richard Dinda; Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, Missouri; 2012; hard cover, 363 pages and 14 pages of preliminary material.**

The March 2012 issue of the *Journal* a review of Gerhard’s *On the Ecclesiastical Ministry—Part One*. Since *Part Two* is now available, this review calls attention to its contents also.

The first section (Chapter V) includes a discussion of ecclesiastical power and the grades and ranks of ministers of the church. As in *Part One* there is the same emphasis on the Christian magistrate as having equal power with the clergy and the laity of the church. For example, in connection with excommunication and suspension from Holy Communion, Gerhard says: “One should not advance to this extreme degree of ecclesiastical censure rashly, without serious counsel and without the consent of the church and especially of the Christian magistrate” (p. 7). Of course, the body of believers must consent, as is clear from Matthew 18:15-17; but where is it written in Scripture that the Christian magistrate must consent? With this provision we can easily understand why Christian church discipline was neglected in Lutheran churches throughout the era when churches were controlled by the state. In our country today Gerhard’s stipulation would be altogether unworkable.

Nevertheless, Gerhard wants to maintain a distinction between ecclesiastical power and political power. He writes: “The ecclesiastical power uses the sword of the Spirit, namely, the Word (Eph. 6:17). . . . By no means does it use the physical sword. . . .” (p. 8). The papists in the Roman Catholic Church are faulted because “they have changed ecclesiastical power into political lordship” (p. 10). “Papist bishops

also arrogate for themselves an autocratic power in the church. . . . They assign themselves an absolute license to interpret Scripture and establish dogmas according to their whim. . . . For the most part they prescribe unprofitable and useless ceremonies and foist these on the church as ceremonies to be observed with the opinion of necessity, worship, and merit . . . , and in this way they confuse church punishment with civil punishment. They sell indulgences for a price and even attribute to themselves an absolute power to bind and loose” (p. 14).

With regard to ministers of the church Gerhard rightly declares: “Pastors of the church . . . are called ‘leaders’ with regard to a certain power. But that power is not political but spiritual, not autocratic but ministerial, not lording it over consciences or faith but serving the salvation of men” (p. 16).

With regard to the ranks of the ministry Gerhard, of course, finds fault with the hierarchical system of the papal church, with pope, cardinals, archbishops, bishops, priests, deacons, and subdeacons. In contrast Gerhard stresses equality among ministers, noting that “*the power of ministry* the preaching of the Word and the administration of the Sacraments and *the power of jurisdiction*, which consists of the use of the Keys, belong to all ministers equally” (p. 20, *emph. orig.*). Since there is no divine institution of various grades in the ministry, Gerhard maintains that “the church has been given freedom according to circumstances—namely, of time and size—to establish more or fewer grades among ministers in any assembly” (p. 20). In connection with this subject matter Gerhard investigates all the various terms used in Scripture for ministers, such as apostles, prophets, evangelists, bishops, elders, deacons, pastors, and teachers. He stresses that the New Testament does not make a distinction between bishops, elders, and pastors. These terms are used interchangeably in most cases.

As always Gerhard discusses Scripture first in all matters, but then he continues with lengthy consideration of the views of the fathers. No doubt, he felt this was necessary to establish the misuse of the fathers on the part of Roman Catholic theologians, such as Robert Bellarmine (1542-1621), his chief antagonist. In fact, Gerhard seems to delight in finding every possible error he can in Bellarmine’s argumentation. A few of Gerhard’s own points of attack seem a bit far-fetched, but generally he stays on track and demolishes his opponent with Scripture, the fathers, and sound reasoning.

In the second section (Chapter VI) Gerhard discusses the two-fold purpose of the ministry, namely, “*the principal*, which is the glory of God; and *the intermediate*, which is the conversion of men, reconciliation with God, and eternal salvation” (p. 74). Here Gerhard takes aim against “the new Enthusiasts, Anabaptists, and Schwenkfeldians (who deny that the external ministry of the Word and Sacraments is a means of conferring faith and salvation, but who, on the other hand, send men back to an inner Word and movement of the Holy Spirit . . .)” (p. 75). This is certainly an important consideration in our day when so many would-be preachers neglect Word and Sacrament in favor of what they consider more successful means to accomplish their goals.

In Chapter VI Gerhard also discusses the various duties of ministers, such as preaching the Word, dispensing the Sacraments, praying for the flock, administering church discipline, following traditional rituals, and caring for the poor and the sick. He also shows that the papists prefer other duties for their priests, such as sacrificing the Mass, presiding as lords and masters, and blessing various persons or objects, yet with no divine command to do so.

On the basis of such passages as Acts 20:30-31, 2 Timothy 2:24-25, and Titus 1:7-9, Gerhard maintains that “the ministers of the church are obligated to keep a vigilant eye, watching out for the snares of the wolves, and to resist them with all their might” (p. 106). On the question of whether it is loving to condemn false teachers, Gerhard declares: “*The true nature of true love* . . . flows from faith (Gal. 5:6) and, therefore, does not approve of errors that oppose the doctrine of faith. . . . Because love burns not only for the neighbor but also and especially for God, it declares and claims that the glory of God is shaken by corruptions of doctrine. . . . After all, there must be a distinction between the seducers, who stubbornly speak against a truth proved to them time and again, . . . and the seduced, who do not understand the darkness of Satan lurking in corruptions of doctrine but have been carried off into fellowship with error out of their weakness but who are prepared to embrace the demonstrated truth. . . .

In fact, even through their corrupt ministry, God can still gather His church, and in the midst of the assemblies of the priests of Baal He can still save some who do not bow their knees before Baal. . . . Offensive humor and levity, jesting and insulting must be avoided, and the words of Scripture must be applied in reproof. Finally, we must work in every way to make clear to all that in our debate against the erring we are seeking only the salvation of the soul” (pp. 108-110).

On the daily lives of church ministers Gerhard says: “Those who teach uprightly but live wickedly again destroy with their bad behavior what they are building with genuine doctrine” (p. 117). He quotes this word from Lactantius: ““People prefer examples to words because it is easy to speak but difficult to act as an example”” (p. 117). The qualifications for the public ministry as outlined in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 he has discussed in some detail.

Chapter VII is lengthy, dealing mainly with two subjects: the salaries of and the marriages of ministers of the church. On the basis of 1 Corinthians 9:13-14 Gerhard teaches that ministers should receive pay for their work. But caution is needed. “Receiving wages is one thing; love of money is another” (p. 184). Gerhard concludes “that the ministry be taken up for the love of God to promote His glory and people’s salvation, not out of a zeal for acquiring what becomes one’s own” (p. 186). “For pastors of the church to change parishes continually for the sake of greater income is sinful . . .” (p. 187).

Eighty-two pages (pp. 190-271) are devoted to a thorough discussion of the marriages of pastors. At Gerhard’s time this was a crucial issue, for the Roman Catholic Church strongly opposed such marriages and severely condemned the Lutherans for permitting them. Bellarmine is the target for Gerhard’s sustained attack against the Roman Catholic doctrine and practice. On the basis of Hebrews 13:4 Gerhard states: “Whatever is honorable in all people must not be forbidden to a certain class of people who are seeking it rightly and legitimately. Marriage is honorable in all people” (p. 193). On the basis of 1 Corinthians 7 Gerhard concludes that “marriage must be conceded as a divinely instituted remedy to those who are subject to the danger of fornication. . . . But most priests are subject to the danger of fornication and understand that they have not been endowed with the gift of continence . . .” (p. 193). Gerhard provides evidence from history that Roman Catholic enforcement of celibacy has led to horrible acts of fornication and sexual perversion. It seems obvious that the Catholic Church of today is still plagued by the same kinds of sin, resulting in the payment of millions of dollars of church funds to the victims of sexual abuse on the part of Roman Catholic clergy.

This volume concludes with very brief chapters (VIII, IX, and X) on things that conflict with the ministry, the use of this teaching on the ministry, and a definition of the ecclesiastical ministry. This is certainly a useful book for any minister of the church. Some issues that Gerhard had to deal with are of little interest to us, such as the teaching of the fathers on celibacy and marriage. Yet even with regard to these topics there is much we can learn and put into practice. The most useful part of this book is the opportunity to examine what the Scriptures have to say on various matters of doctrine and practice and how Gerhard used these Scriptures to establish the points he felt necessary to make in his time. May we be just as careful and thorough in the examination of the matters in controversy in our own time.

**Martin Luther: *Prefaces I (Luther’s Works, Volume 59)*, edited by Christopher Boyd Brown; Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, Missouri; 2012; hard cover, 388 pages and 40 introductory pages.**

The introduction points out that “Luther burst into prominence with the controversy over indulgences and the ‘Luther case’ became the talk of Germany. Luther himself became by far the best-selling author in the German press, transforming the printing industry . . . with the popularity of his own works” (p. xix). It is understandable that other authors and printers would ask Luther to write prefaces for their books in the hope that they too would become popular with potential readers. Because Luther was primarily interested in the cause of reformation rather than his own reputation, he was happy to help his friends in this way.

In this volume we can read Luther’s prefaces to books or pamphlets written by his close



associates, such as Johann Bugenhagen, Philip Melancthon, Johann Brenz, Justus Menius, and Justus Jonas, as well as prefaces to material from the past, such as some writings by John Hus and Girolamo Savonarola. Luther was generally generous in his praise of the work of others. His main object, of course, was to bring to light the wonders of the true Gospel, while launching a powerful attack on the falsely held views of the Roman Catholic pope and his supporters.

Luther's teaching was strongly opposed by many authorities in both church and state, and those who publicly agreed with his teaching were often persecuted, even executed. Luther knew that Christians are not to defend the true teaching with force, but are only to use the Word of God. In response to the death of the first two Lutheran martyrs in Brussels, Luther wrote in a preface in 1523: "And the servants of the popes are raging against Christ with unbelievable madness. Others are writing curses and blasphemies. . . . Up to this point we have been acting more calmly, but if they persist, we, too, will finally bid farewell to the emperor's edict, not so that we might burn anyone at the stake (as they do) or vanquish [our foes] or act with any kind of force (for that is not the way Christians behave), but so that we might defend the glory of the Word with our words and writings . . ." (p. 68).

Luther was even willing to quell a false rumor being spread against his associate who turned against him, Andreas Karlstadt. In a preface to a booklet Karlstadt wrote in his own defense, Luther said: "Dr. Karlstadt is my greatest enemy with respect to doctrine, and concerning it we have attacked each other so vehemently that there is no hope of any reconciliation or further fellowship. Nevertheless, . . . I do want him to find me to be faithful, as much as I am able, and will gladly avail him of this service and others, considering that Christ teaches and guides us by His own example to do good to our enemies and to love them. . . . And I am all the more glad to do this because I hope that God will bestow His grace . . . and [Karlstadt] will at last acknowledge his guilt and abandon his error . . . , and return to the truth. . . . [B]y rendering this service I do not in any respect confirm Dr. Karlstadt's opinions and teaching, especially on the Sacrament, nor do I agree with them in any way" (pp. 130-131). Luther's actions matched his words, for he even provided secret refuge in his own home for Karlstadt when he was in danger from the authorities (p. 134).

Karlstadt's writings against the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the Lord's Supper were followed by other such attacks by Ulrich Zwingli and Johann Oeculampadius. In one of his prefaces Luther had this to say about these men whom he called Sacramentarians: "There are two foundations for their error: one, that according to reason it is something altogether absurd; second, that it is unnecessary for Christ's body and blood to be in the bread and wine. . . . Accordingly, . . . they amble up to the Scriptures and look for ways to import their own understanding and to twist Scripture around to their own opinion. . . . Behold, . . . if they stuck with the words as they stand, or proved from the text and its sequence or with some other sound argument that the words had to be understood otherwise than as they read, they would not give rise to any sects" (p. 160). "I also want all good Christians to be warned herewith that they must be wary of these sects and keep to the pure, plain words of Christ . . ." (p. 161).

One of the main issues Luther had to deal with was the papacy's forbidding of the marriage of priests. Thus in a preface Luther made these comments: "For the world certainly cannot deny that the apostles and the early bishops were married, and many of the ancient canons supported such marriage. . . . I think it should be clearly evident that the ancients esteemed the estate of marriage more highly than the vow of chastity" (p. 228). In our own time the Roman Catholic Church is being charged with many sexual abuse offenses. Luther's words seem to fit current times as well as his: "Note also here that they not only slander and revile the innocent marriages of our people but also keep such chaste silence about the most depraved whoremongers and public adulterers and rapists and violators of maidens—which is what they are among themselves. . . . They produce their filth in all manner of unchastity in the sight of everyone in the most shameful and offensive way, and afterward they point at the marriage of priests who decently and quietly stay with a wife. . . . We have Scripture on our side, as well as the ancient statements of the fathers and the laws of the earlier church . . ." (pp. 229-230).

Christian education was another topic close to the Reformer's heart, as we hear in these words to

Christian parents: “Note, too, that if children are not brought up with instruction in the arts, but are made into nothing but gluttonous little swine, who look no farther than to their fodder, then where will we get pastors, preachers, and others for the Word of God, the ministry of the Church, the care of souls, and worship? Where will kings, princes, lords, cities, and lands get chancellors, councilors, secretaries, and officials?” (p. 246). “[I]f you have a child who is suited for instruction, then you are not free to bring him up as you please, neither does it lie in your choice to treat him as you like, but you must consider that you are accountable to God to assist both of His governments [DL: church and state] and to serve Him in them. God has need of a pastor, a preacher, a schoolteacher in His spiritual kingdom, and you could provide Him with one and do not do so” (p. 247). “So, too, in secular government you are better able to serve your lord or city by bringing up children than by building castles and cities or gathering together all the treasures of the world. For what good does all that do if there are no learned, wise, and upright people?” (p. 247).

In a preface to Melancthon’s commentary on Colossians Luther wrote: “I truly cherish such books of Master Philip more than my own. . . . For this reason, my books are very stormy and more warlike. I have to dig out the roots and stumps, chop out the thorns and underbrush, and fill in the potholes. . . . But Master Philip follows carefully and quietly and enjoys building and planting, sowing and watering. . . , according to the gifts that God has richly given to him. . . . What a treasure the whole world would have considered such a book as this twenty years ago, if they had been able to possess it!” (pp. 249-250).

Johann Brenz was another whom Luther praised very highly. In a preface to Brenz’s commentary on Amos he wrote that “my own writings seem exceedingly shabby to me when compared to your writings and those of men like you” (p. 287). “But the gift of God that I particularly love and revere in you . . . is that you emphasize the righteousness of faith so faithfully and purely in all your writings. For this article is the head and cornerstone that alone begets, nurtures, builds, preserves, and defends the Church of God. Without it, the Church cannot remain standing for a single hour, as you know and perceive. That is why you insist upon it as you do. For no one can teach correctly in the church or resist any adversary successfully, unless he has grasped this article . . .” (p. 288). “Therefore, I beg you, most excellent Brenz, continue vigorously to press this article concerning righteousness by all means, . . . for this article is the very heel of the Seed who opposes the ancient serpent, the heel that crushes its head” (p. 289).

There is much in this volume of prefaces that is worthwhile to read and remember. Introductions to each preface written by the translators and editors are helpful in providing background for better understanding of what Luther wrote.

**C. F. W. Walther: *The Church & The Office of the Ministry* (original title: *Die Stimme unserer Kirche in der Frage von Kirche und Amt*), translated by J. T. Mueller, revised and edited by Matthew C. Harrison; Concordia Publishing House; 2012; hard cover, 495 pages and 25 introductory pages.**

In addition to a twenty-volume addition to *Luther’s Works* and an English translation of Johann Gerhard’s *Theological Commonplaces*, Concordia Publishing House has now begun to publish new editions of the writings of the Missouri Synod’s first president and leading theologian, C. F. W. Walther. The first volume in this new series is now available, the book that first established Walther as a champion of a new kind of Lutheran polity, adapted to conditions in this country and yet firmly in agreement with Scripture and the basic principles of the Lutheran Confessions.

This volume includes nine theses on church and ten theses on the ministry. Throughout them all Walther first presents his thesis, then the Scriptural basis, then corroborating materials from the Lutheran Confessions and the writings of orthodox theologians, such as Martin Luther, Martin Chemnitz, and Johann Gerhard. An appendix supplies valuable historical background, such as the original Altenburg Theses of 1841, the pastoral letter of J. Grabau of Buffalo (with whom Walther could not agree), and the

views of Wilhelm Loehe of Bavaria, who tried to mediate between Grabau and Walther.

In 1962 J. T. Mueller translated Walther's book into English, and this is the basic text used by Matthew Harrison in this update. But Harrison, the current president of Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, has seen fit to revise and correct Mueller's translation in a few key points. Mueller's translation gives the impression in some places that Walther was referring to a local congregation when in actuality Walther had a much broader conception of *Kirche* in mind than a local congregation. In fact, in one of his many helpful editorial notes Harrison makes this observation: "I believe it is self-evident from the material below that while a 'synod' carries out all sorts of tasks and functions that may not be essential to the existence of the Church, nevertheless a synod is in fact 'church' because it is a transcongregational expression of ecclesiastical unity (church fellowship)" (p. 65). Thus on this point we find Harrison (and Walther also) in agreement with the "Theses on Church and Ministry" that were adopted by the Church of the Lutheran Confession in 1960.

This volume is called a Study Edition, and there is indeed much to study in this attractive book that is well laid-out for the reader. Our pastors, teachers, and lay leaders would surely gain a better understanding of church and ministry by a careful reading. Our church body has always recognized Walther as a very special gift of God to American Lutherans, and we can certainly learn from him because of his approach in going back to Scripture for his conclusions.

As is the case with the other gigantic Concordia projects currently underway (i.e., Luther and Gerhard), the price per book is considerably less if one subscribes to the whole series. In fact, there is even more discount if one subscribes to all three of the new Concordia series.

- David Lau