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TH601.NA Systematic Theology II: Christ and the Church

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Christ and The Church: The Grace of Jesus in the Church

Christology is the branch of Christian theology centered on the person, nature, and role of Jesus Christ. Ecclesiology is the study of the Christian church. Both Christology and Ecclesiology become one when reflecting on the powerful gift of grace. The redemptive life of Jesus Christ imparts the forgiveness of sins for all those who believe in him as their savior. The concept of mercy for sinners is one that permeates into all aspects of worship. For example, Christian liturgy such as confession, Communion, baptism, and preaching of the Word are all modes of extending grace to the body of Christ in the context of the church. Grace is at the heart of the gospel, and the gospel is the foundation of the Christian church. Christology and Ecclesiology combine in Christ's death and resurrection, which saturates grace within the context of church practicum.

Christ's Embodiment of Grace

Before diving into the impact of Christology on Ecclesiology through grace, the concept of grace itself must be addressed. The most impactful moment of Jesus' ministry does not occur during his lifetime, but rather upon his death. When Christ died on the cross and rose again, he brought restoration and reconciliation to all those who believed in him. Jesus' death paid the price for the sins of the world and allowed humanity to receive the unconditional gift of grace. The narrative of grace can be summarized as follows: First, sin brought separation from God.

Second, Jesus served as a penal substitute to reconcile man with God. Third, grace was extended to both Jew and Gentile. Lastly, the grace of God is a gift that believers can always rejoice in.

Grace is necessary to reestablish relationship between God and man. In the beginning, both parties lived in communion with one another. When sin entered the world, humanity was never the same. The manner in which sin entered the world was through God's own creation. More specifically, "... *this pessimistic appraisal of human potential rests... on the fact that Adam and Eve, our first parents, sinned.*"¹ It was the actions of Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit that imparted guilt upon the rest of the world. Regardless of human effort, and often the lack thereof, the world was distanced from God. Humanity needed a savior to break the hold that sin had on the world.

This savior that the world needed was Jesus Christ, who took the place of man and died for their sins. As Scripture states, "...*he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.*"² Jesus took on the punishment that humankind deserved in order to restore favor for man through the forgiveness of sin. His death on the cross achieved a redemptive act of eternal significance that biblical theologians refer to as penal substitution. This doctrine states that, "*God gave himself in the person of his Son to suffer instead of us the death, punishment and curse due to fallen humanity as the penalty for sin.*"³ This perspective was accepted by the likes of Martin Luther and John Calvin as a sufficient means of explaining the crucifixion's impact on our lives. The finality of Jesus' sacrifice is expounded upon by author Michael Bird:

¹ Paul Jewett, "Original Sin and the Fall of Man," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 19, no. 1 (1976), 27.

² (Isaiah 53:5, NIV)

³ Stephen Jeffery, Michael Ovey, and Andrew Sach, *Pierced for Our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 21

*He absorbed the wrath with such perfection and such finality that no wrath remains on those for whom his sacrifice is effected. He drank the dregs of God's judgment so that not a drop remains for his followers.*⁴

Grace came through Christ paying the price for man's sin on the cross. This penal substitution of Jesus for the world completely satisfied the justified wrath of God.

When Jesus died on the cross, his grace was extended to both Jew and Gentile. This was a radical concept for the Jewish population living in the Ancient Near East. The cornerstone of Jewish theology was that the God of the universe elected the Israelites and gave them His law which they were called to obey.⁵ This belief system rooted in observance of the law and election of a people group, the Israelites, conflicted with the sufficient grace provided by Jesus Christ. The promise of grace fulfilled the law and extended beyond the Israelites to all who believed. As it is written in Romans 1:16, "*For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.*"⁶ God's grace is shared with every tongue and tribe, but is only received through faith in Jesus.

The miracle of God's grace is worthy of praise. Jesus fulfilled the law through his sacrifice on the cross so that humanity could live in communion with God once again. The victory over evil brings about eternal rejoicing. Saint Augustine's *Confessions* describes a life lived in sin prior to his salvation and baptism. After placing his faith in Jesus, Saint Augustine basks in the Lord's grace:

⁴ Michael F. Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), Amazon Edition, Loc 9008

⁵ E.P. Sanders, *Judaism, Practice and Belief: 63 BCE - 66 CE*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2016), 397.

⁶ Romans 1:16

*“I will love Thee, O Lord, and thank Thee, and confess unto Thy name; because Thou hast forgiven me these so great and heinous deeds of mine. To Thy grace I ascribe it, and to Thy mercy, that Thou hast melted away my sins as it were ice.”*⁷

The totality of Jesus’ death and resurrection are beautifully articulated as ‘melting away’ our sin. What was once an insurmountable barrier between man and God, Jesus reconciled by paying the price for humanity’s transgressions. The gift of grace bridges the gap between Christology and Ecclesiology.

Grace Imparted to the Church

How is the grace of God imparted in the context of the Christian church? The short answer is in every aspect of worship. The liturgy of church practicum points to the infinite mercies of God through His son Jesus. All of the sacraments glorify God and bring to light his merciful character. Four examples where Christology and Ecclesiology amplify God’s grace are in confession, Communion, baptism, and preaching of the Word.

Confession

One of the earliest commandments in the gospels is to confess one’s sins to God. In terms of Christology, Jesus’ death and resurrection on the cross brought about grace to those who placed their faith in him. This forgiveness can only be received through the practice of confession. The Christian church has taken this mode of receiving grace, confession, and implemented it into their worship of God. While this process of liturgical confession can take many forms, the idea is instrumental in the Christian experience. The importance of the practice was championed by Martin Luther as part of his Ninety-Five Thesis. The Lutheran church prioritized confession and absolution upon launching their Protestant movement. Today,

⁷ Augustine, and Vernon J. Bourke, *Confessions*, (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1966), 32.

“Lutherans are joined by Roman Catholics, Episcopalians, Methodists, and Presbyterians, among whom the primary worship resources for Sunday include some adaptation of medieval sacramental penance.”⁸ The majority of Christian worship includes a portion dedicated to the act of confession before God.

Confession means nothing without grace. The extension of God’s mercy to those who believe in Jesus allows the church to confess their sins with relief. On the other side of confession, is forgiveness and reunion with God. This unconditional promise is powerful for the believer. It smothers their pride and self-reliance and humbles them before God. Gail Ramshaw puts it this way:

*To confess sin is to acknowledge the truth of the human distance from God, to articulate self-awareness concerning the flawed human condition. In the confession of sin, we ritualize our belief that we are not divine, little deities running around.*⁹

There is a joyful sense of relief when the burden of an individual’s transgressions are lifted away. The intended effect of confession and forgiveness is freedom. The first verse in Galatians chapter 5 puts it plainly, “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.”¹⁰ Confession is one example of God’s liberating grace imparted upon the Christian church.

Communion

Another aspect of Christian liturgy that reflects the grace of Jesus Christ is the sacrament of Holy Communion. The Eucharist is a reminder of Christ’s sacrifice for humanity, and therefore an extension of God’s mercy. The gospel of Luke describes the origin of the sacrament,

⁸ Gail Ramshaw, 2016, “Martin Luther and the Confession of Sin,” *Worship* 90 (1), 5.

⁹ Gail Ramshaw, 2016, “Martin Luther and the Confession of Sin,” *Worship* 90 (1), 6.

¹⁰ Galatians 5:1

which includes the breaking of bread and drinking of wine in remembrance of Jesus. On the first night of Passover, Jesus sat down with his disciples in the upper room and brought out the elements. Addressing his disciples, “...*he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.’*”¹¹ The bread represented the body of Jesus, which was about to be literally broken in the hours ahead. “*In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.’*”¹² The cup of wine represented the blood Jesus would pour out for the world’s sin. Both the bread and the wine of the Last Supper symbolized the miracle that was to come in the days ahead. What would begin as a brutal death, would end in a miraculous resurrection.

During that time, the disciples did not fully understand what Jesus was referring to. Today, however, the Christian church appreciates the revelation of the risen Christ. Ecclesiology embraces the Last Supper as an opportunity to reflect on the crucifixion of Jesus. Through the liturgical practice of the Eucharist, grace is remembered, praised and sealed in the hearts and minds of believers.

As a church body, remembering the body and blood of Christ in Communion allows believers to receive the re-presented gospel. The importance of recalling the redemptive act of Jesus Christ is critical to fruitful worship. When the church remembers the sacrifice of Jesus, they are humbled before God and ready to receive His infinite grace. Forgetting the gospel as a church leads to illusions of self-sufficiency and pride. No body of Christ can flourish without the true vine, which is Jesus Christ. Author Bryan Chapell claims that, “*we tell the gospel story again because we forget. We can’t tire of something we forget and need to be reminded of.*”¹³

¹¹ Luke 22:19

¹² Luke 22:20

¹³ Bryan Chapell. *Christ-Centered Worship*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2010), Kindle Edition, Loc. 1953.

This means that whether someone is a new believer or a mature Christian, the sacrament of Communion is just as important to liturgy.

Upon remembering what Christ has done for believers through the sacrament of Communion, the church responds in praise to God. The sacrificial love of Jesus is no longer text in a book, but a vibrant historical reality. The blood stained cross, the crown of thorns, and the lashings by the Roman soldiers all are brought to the forefront of the congregation participating in worship. In the midst of such suffering, there is a reasonable response of rejoicing to the Lord. No man has earned this gift of grace, but it is received. The mercy of the Lord is once again bestowed upon believers as they receive Communion in the ecclesiastic context of church.

Lastly, after recalling the crucifixion and praising God, grace is sealed in the hearts and minds of worshipers. This does not imply that grace is only now bestowed upon the worshiper. If that were the case, then grace would be temporal and conditional. The amazing grace of God is final and supplied through faith in Jesus Christ. However, the hearts and minds of believers often fall into deception that they need to earn God's love through works to merit grace. What Communion does is seal the reality of God's grace upon the believer. The work that was already achieved on the cross, becomes known once again to the worshiper. In its fullness, the sacrament of Holy Communion connects the sacrifice of Jesus to the unlimited mercies given to believers. In practicing this sacrament, the Christian church can remember, rejoice, and receive from God.

The practice of Communion is found amongst all Christian denominations today. However, Protestant churches have placed less of an emphasis on the sacrament relative to the Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions. Today, the Protestant church holds Communion at a frequency far lower than the Early Church did. Author Georg H. Vischer states:

Until recently, it has been celebrated not more than four times a year, certainly not more than once a month. And when it is celebrated, it is not the center of the worship service, but it is attached to a service of the Word, an appendix which is performed for the sake of tradition and which may serve as a kind of visible demonstration of what is preached.¹⁴

The Protestant church places a high value on the authority of Scripture. While adhering to Scripture to the best of their ability, the denomination has limited the importance of the foundational sacrament by lower its frequency of practice. Perhaps this is a result of an overcorrection when defecting from the Roman Catholic church. Regardless, the importance of remembering, rejoicing, and receiving God's grace is paramount in worship practicum.

Baptism

A third example of Ecclesiology that reflects the grace of Jesus Christ in Christology is the sacrament of baptism. Baptism is a rite of passage that symbolizes the death of the old self and rebirth of the new self in Christ Jesus. The old self is a slave to sin, but through the gift of grace a believer can be baptized into new life with God. The Great Commission in the gospel of Matthew declares the commandment of baptism as follows:

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."¹⁵

¹⁴Georg H. Vischer, 1977. "Eucharist: Ritual and Reality." *Andover Newton Quarterly* 17 (3): 201.

¹⁵ Matthew 28:18-20

Jesus' final words in the flesh came with the commandment to make disciples. Part of that process included baptism. The connection between the teachings of Jesus and the Christian church today center upon the grace of God. Baptism is yet another liturgical aspect of worship that integrates the mercy of the Lord. There are fascinating lessons to be learned from the Early Church's response to the Great Commission and how the current Christian church implements baptism today.

The Early Church practiced baptism in a context that emphasized the importance on personal commitment and less of a focus on the mode of baptism. After the movement of Christianity had begun, the risk for following Jesus was high. Apostles were dying for a cause that went against the governing body and major religion at the time. With both the Roman government and the Jewish religious leaders in opposition, the decision to follow Jesus had a lot more risk than in many contexts today. As a result, the emphasis of baptism was placed appropriately on the passion of the believer. In other words, "...*primitive Christianity apparently made baptism accessible only to the most serious and committed candidates. It seems as if the early church was more concerned to weed out and deter than to attract and welcome.*"¹⁶ While the Early Church placed an emphasis on genuine faith of the believer, the mode of administering baptism was less of a priority.

While there was certainly care taken in properly administering the sacrament, the mere number of variations on how to properly administer baptism testified to the subordination of importance. There were four different methods of baptism. These modes include partial immersion, affusion, aspersion, and submersion.¹⁷ Each of these modes goes from sprinkling water to fully dunking the individual in a body of water. While there are multiple modes of

¹⁶ Darren Slade, 2014, "The Early Church's Inconsequential View of the Mode of Baptism," *American Theological Inquiry* 7 (2), 21.

¹⁷ Darren Slade, 2014, "The Early Church's Inconsequential View of the Mode of Baptism," *American Theological Inquiry* 7 (2), 22.

baptism, the Early Church placed its emphasis on the genuine readiness of the believer. The gift of grace imparted by the death and resurrection of Jesus was viewed with high value. This is in contrast with the modern Christian church, which is far less focused on the implications of baptism and more so with the religiosity of baptism.

Today, the Christian church practices many of the same modes of baptism. One of the major theological debates amongst modern day Evangelical Christians is who should be baptized. In contrast to the Early Church, which placed a high priority on personal devotion and readiness, many Mainline Christian denominations support infant baptism. The term paedobaptism describes a church where parents are encouraged to baptize their infants. Author Michael F. Bird describes that infant baptism, “...functions to initiate children into the new covenant and to incorporate them into the visible church.”¹⁸ This contradicts the common theme of Early Church baptisms: personal acknowledgement of faith. As an infant, there is no way to know that a child can form their own belief system in Christ. For an infant to be baptized, it is certainly an honorable ritual, but pales in comparison to a personal profession of faith. While paedobaptism is one modern day perspective that certainly has its own historical merit, there are also other Christian church models such as credobaptism and dual baptism.

Regardless of perspective, mode, and practice, the sacrament of baptism is yet another aspect of Ecclesiology that results from grace. Since Jesus died for the sins of the world, those who believe in him receive complete forgiveness. This promise brings about a new life in the believer, one that is inspired not by sin, but by the Holy Spirit dwelling in them. Baptism is a rite of passage that brings this truth into the forefront of the believer and the Christian church.

Preaching of the Word

¹⁸ Michael F. Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), Amazon Edition, Loc 17341

The fourth and final example of how Christian liturgy reflects the grace of Jesus Christ is through the preaching of Scripture. The teaching of the Word of God has roots that go to the beginning of time: *“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”*¹⁹ The Bible justifies itself as holy and inspired by a timeless God. Scripture is God’s revelation to man. As a result, it is the duty of the church to honor God in studying, explaining, and teaching the Word of God. There is certainly biblical justification for preaching the Word. The Great Commission commands that believers go into the world and tell people about Jesus. In addition, Jesus uses the Word of God to defend himself against the temptations of Satan in the desert. Finally, Jesus himself preached to his followers, with no example more famous than the Sermon on the Mount. Therefore, equipping disciples and non-believers alike through teaching the Word of God is vital to the role of the Christian church.

One of the most impactful narratives that comes from Scripture is the good news that Jesus died for the sins of the world. As a result, Christology and Ecclesiology collide in the preaching of the gospel. Grace is transmitted through the teaching of Scripture by church leaders. This is the duty of the church; to honor the gift of grace by accurately expounding upon Scripture. The purpose in doing so is to bring about revelation of the goodness of God and His mercy upon the world. Author Constance Cherry states, *“The purpose of the service of the Word is so people may be addressed by God through the Holy Scriptures and thereby changed for God’s glory and kingdom.”*²⁰ In order to transfer the revelation of God’s grace to the individual lives of those in a church’s congregation, the Word of God must be read and preached on a weekly basis. As messengers of the gospel, Christians are encouraged, edified, and equipped

¹⁹ John 1:1

²⁰ Constance Cherry, *The Worship Architect*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 70.

through the teaching of Scripture. The gift of God's grace can be transmitted to believers through the Christian church practice of preaching the Word of God.

Conclusion

Christ's death and resurrection resulted in unconditional grace for all those who believe in him. The Christian church, a house of worship to God, naturally responds with liturgy that reflects revelation of His mercy. The impartation of God's grace is seen in confession, Communion, baptism, and the preaching of the Word. When believer confess their sins before God, they are met not with condemnation, but forgiveness and unconditional love. When a Christian partakes in the sacrament of Holy Communion, they remember the sacrificial love of Jesus, rejoice in his mercy, and receive his grace. During baptism, a believer is drowned of their slavery and old ways in sin and emerges new in Christ Jesus. Lastly, when leaders teach the Word of God to followers and unbelievers, they are transformed and received the gospel in its fullness. Christology and Ecclesiology blend together in a beautiful manner when reflecting upon the grace of God. Doing so reveals that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of Christian worship.

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