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# The Reformation @500

*Sola Gratia* – Grace Alone

## A Small-Group Discussion Guide

The start of the Protestant Reformation is often dated to Martin Luther nailing “The 95 Theses” to the church door in Wittenberg, Germany on Oct. 31, 1517. Historians reflecting on the Reformation and its meaning identify five statements or watchwords as central to the movement. These watchwords, called the five “solas” from the Latin word meaning “only” or “alone,” are: grace alone, faith alone, scripture alone, Christ alone, and to God’s glory alone.

This first of five study guides explores “grace alone,” using reflections and insights gleaned from presentations made at an event held at St. Andrew’s Hall, Vancouver in Nov. 2013. The six sections in the study invite participants beyond an academic discussion to tell stories of grace from their lives as a way to understand “grace alone” now.

It would be helpful for each participant to have a copy of the guide so they can have the indented material in front of them.



## Section I: Finding a Definition

What is grace? How do you define grace? How do you know it when you see it?

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## Section II: Finding Our Stories of Grace

Frances Savill (minister of Richmond Presbyterian Church, Richmond, BC) told this story:

In the summer of 2013, I took basic training in preparation for being a reserve chaplain in the Canadian Forces. Basic training is grueling, with sleep deprivation and drill sergeants yelling at recruits reminding them they will flunk out. It is a harsh, graceless environment. Those going through basic training are warned about the gas hut. There, recruits are required to put on gas masks quickly and efficiently as the hut they are in fills with tear gas. Getting the gas in one's eyes or lungs is an extremely unpleasant experience. This part of basic training is feared.

The sergeant in charge of the gas hut said to the recruits, "This is my range, I am in charge here. No one fails. We will do it as many times as it takes for people to pass. I have your back." The sergeant was a sign of grace in a harsh and fearful environment.

The sergeant's words are similar to the words God might speak, "This is my world, I am in charge here. Even when you are afraid, I have your back. You will make it through, because I have confidence I can get you through." Getting through does not mean life will be easy. Things may be difficult, but God has our back.

Do you agree with Frances Savill that this is a story of grace?

Take a moment to reflect. What story or stories of grace do you have? Could you tell a story of grace to the group?

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## Section III: Grace and Law; Grace and Work

Law and grace have often been described as opposites:

law condemns while grace forgives;

law leads to believing good works can save while grace says it is all about trusting God.

Stephen Farris (Dean, St. Andrew's Hall, Vancouver, BC) added the following to Frances' story:

The sergeant had rules about how to act on his range and what to do in the gas hut. Rules that could be called "laws." Law is not opposed to grace. In fact, with John Calvin's "third use of the law" the law is an instrument of grace, revealing the path to be lived as those who have received God's grace.

Do you agree that law is an instrument of grace? Does the presence of rules limit grace? When has law been a sign of grace to you?

Paul Stevens, author and theologian retired from Carey Hall in Vancouver, BC, invited new thinking regarding the connection between grace and work. Stevens was reflecting on work not only as work for pay, but all forms of work:

Work was given to humanity prior to humanity's fall. Thus work is a good thing. Work, along with all other things, is made meaningful by grace and is empowered by God's grace. Work, which was given to human beings at creation prior to humanity's fall, is empowered by God's grace. While work after the fall became a burden it still retains the grace it had before the fall. This tension between grace and burden present within work is evident in the fact that work has the potential to enslave human beings and can be a means of spreading grace.

Are work and grace in opposition to one another? Or is Stevens correct that work is a sign of grace?

Are there moments when work has been transformed from being a burden to becoming a sign of grace?

How does seeing work as a means of spreading grace change your relationship with work?

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## Section IV: Exploring Biblical Metaphors of Grace

Diane Stinton, professor of missiology at Regent College, Vancouver, asked:

Which Biblical passage predominates our view of grace:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

John 3:16

or

"I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly"

John 10:10

What does John 3:16 say about grace and grace's purpose?

What does John 10:10 say about grace and grace's purpose?

Which of these biblical pictures of grace speaks most strongly to you? Why?

Are there other biblical pictures of grace you would suggest?

In what ways does the biblical picture of grace we resonate with impact the way we live our lives?

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## Section V: First Nations Christian Community Reflection on Grace

First Nations Christians in North America aid in reflection on “grace alone.” Mary Fontaine, director of Hummingbird Ministries, a Presbyterian ministry with Aboriginal Peoples in Vancouver, suggested two specific areas where this occurs:

First, First Nations communities live in hope of communal reconciliation. It is not an individual experience, rather grace is known and understood corporately.

Second, the creation is the first sign of God's grace. This challenges any definition of grace that is limited only to the story of the cross. Since creation is the first sign of God's grace, the celebration of that grace is directly linked to the honouring and protection of creation.

Where have you experienced grace as a corporate, communal reality? How is experiencing grace communally different from experiencing it individually?

How is creation a sign of grace? In what ways can you and your community of faith celebrate creation as a sign of grace?

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## Section VI: Summing Up

Name one way your understanding of grace has been challenged or re-affirmed by this conversation.

Name one thing you will do, say, begin to change or believe because of this conversation.

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The “grace alone” event was the first of five Ref@500 project events taking place from 2013 to 2017. Sponsored by the Committee on History and funded through the support of the Ewart Endowment for Theological Education and the Conference Fund of the Life and Mission Agency of The Presbyterian Church in Canada, these events are leading up to the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in 2017.

The project's purpose is to address the questions:

What do the five “solas,” central to the Reformation, say to the church in Canada today?

Are the 500-year-old theological slogans robust enough to be relevant today?

For more information about the Reformation @ 500 Project or this study guide, contact Peter Bush, 197 Browning Blvd., Winnipeg, MB, R3K 0L1, email peterwwpres@mymts.net or call 204-837-5706.