

# Sermon from Pastor Paul Smith

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The gift of God – it's grace that unites us: the four 'G's of gospel life as the church of Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:8–10)

Ephesians 2:8–10: 'For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.'

'The gift of God – it's grace that unites us.'

This is the theme for the Convention of the General Synod of our church, held in Adelaide this weekend.

Synod themes are used by all kinds of Christian churches around the world to help guide their people along a common purpose with a common outlook for those sisters and brothers in Christ who gather for the work that God gives to them, in their service as Christian delegates meeting together in a church convention.

'The gift of God – it's grace that unites us.' This theme for the 21st Convention of the General Synod of our Lutheran Church was designed to capture the heart of the Scripture passage that was chosen for the Convention – the Scripture passage that the theme is based on:

Ephesians 2:8–10: For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

The clear focus of the theme and this Scripture is the core word of the gospel: GRACE. You might have memorised a little mnemonic for the word 'grace' back in your confirmation or Sunday school days: Grace stands for 'God's Riches at Christ's Expense'.

For this Sunday message on this weekend of the Convention, let me unfold four words that begin with the letter 'G'. Four words that are behind this text and behind the theme of the Convention. Four words that describe our common purpose as people of GRACE. These are the four 'G's of our gospel life as the church of Jesus Christ: Gift – Grace – Gathered – for Good works. This first 'G' word is a direct quote from our Scripture passage, where the Apostle Paul directs the attention of his congregation at Ephesus to the generous giving heart of God.

The GIFT of GOD!

The wonderful thing about gifts is that they are not earned – you can't demand a gift. If you did that, then it wouldn't be a gift. You can't order one online –

though, I do remember a family member who would buy himself Christmas presents and would write on the tag to 'his name' from Santa!

A gift is something that someone hands to you, with their heart and mind directed to you. It is not a medal. It is not an award. It is not an acknowledgement of service.

So, our Synod theme begins with our beggarly hands opened to receive from God – as we do every time we receive the sacrament of the altar. And the Apostle Paul makes it clear that we don't earn what God has for us – we haven't and could not earn it – 'so that no one can boast', St Paul says. And this focus on the giving heart of God takes us directly to the second 'G' word – this is a word that is at the heart of our Scripture passage from Ephesians and central to our Synod theme.

GRACE: It's GRACE that unites us.

Listen again to the words of Ephesians 2: 'For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast.'

Grace!

Grace is not just a theological concept – but it is the call to make central to our witness as a church the grace of God at work in our baptism into Christ's death and resurrection.

The context of the letter to the Ephesians is completely focused on BAPTISM. Throughout his letter, the Apostle Paul uses a shorthand 'in Christ' to declare our status as 'heirs' who have died with Christ in the waters of baptism and been raised with him to 'walk in newness of life'.

In the letter to the Ephesians, St Paul is dealing with the context of some of the early Christians who were requiring the Jewish custom of circumcision for all new Christians. At the first convention of the early church, which we read about in Acts chapter 15, we learn that the early Christians resolved to say no to the circumcision party and say yes to welcoming uncircumcised Gentile Christians as full participants in the mission of God in the church.

This same conviction was captured by Martin Luther in 1517 when he nailed his famous 95 Theses on the Wittenberg church door. He confirmed what God has done for us in our baptism, and, in thesis number 37, Luther declared, 'All true Christians, whether living or dead, participate in all the blessings of Christ and the church; and this is the gift of God!'

In our baptism into Christ, we are given ALL the blessings of Christ and his cross: the full and free abundant forgiveness of ALL sin, new life and salvation. Central to this simple statement of Luther is that little word 'ALL' ... We receive ALL the blessings of Christ – we get it ALL!

We get it all because we are people of grace! We are people of what Luther referred to as 'the happy exchange'. Christ goes to the cross as the sinless one – who takes upon himself the sin of the world – our sin. He dies and exchanges his righteousness for our sin – in our baptism into Christ, we

receive his righteousness so that we would have peace with God. A happy exchange.

This is the grace of God in Christ. This grace is what unites us in our common baptism into Christ.

Now, the third 'G' word in our text is not noticeable at first look at our Scripture verses of Ephesians 2 unless you pay attention to the plural language.

There are plural verbs everywhere here: 'For by grace you ALL have been saved through faith, and this is not ALL your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we ALL are what he has made us ALL, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be ALL OF our way of life.'

All plurals. Our third 'G' word is 'GATHERED'. We are gathered together in the one body.

God gathers us ALL into his church as sisters and brothers of a common baptism.

There is that extraordinary cavalcade of 'all in ONE' words you might recall coming later in the letter to Ephesians – in chapter 4 – again with that plural language: 'There is one body and one Spirit, just as you ALL were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.'

Gathered to this one common baptism, we see our neighbour and ourselves with God's eyes.

To see each other as sisters and brothers baptised into Christ – to celebrate what God has done – and what God is doing in each other – to the praise of his glorious grace!

Then, finally, the fourth 'G' word in our Scripture text reminds us that this thing of being gathered together in the gift of God's grace is not just a 'fact' but faith that is active in love.

So, the apostle gives his explanation of where this all leads to: 'For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for GOOD WORKS, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.'

For good works! That is our fourth 'G' word. GOOD works.

Now, we have already had the Scripture make it very clear that this is NOT about 'good works' that are done to earn God's favour – we are people of grace!

But, as women and men, baptised in the name of the Lord, we serve as little Christs to those around us and to each other. His grace has equipped us for this service, and so, this passage speaks of good works that we partake in as God's people of grace.

In the gospels, we hear about the woman who anointed the Lord just before he was tortured and crucified.

He is at Bethany in the house of Simon, the leper – at the table when a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard and broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head, with some in the room scolding the

woman, telling her off. The Lord Jesus said, 'Let her alone; why do you trouble her?'

Then, the Scripture tells us that the Lord interpreted her action as a 'good work'. A good work performed for him.

Jesus explained to those around him, 'She has performed a good work for me ... Truly, I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her'.

'She has performed a good work for me.'

This is what we are gathered for in our common baptism – to do good – according to the Lord's good and gracious will – to serve each other and to serve the neighbour in the name of the Good Shepherd. In his parable of the sheep and the goats, the Lord explained, 'As you did it to the least of these, you did it unto me!'

This is what we do when we gather as delegates in the Convention of General Synod – we seek to serve – to do good work in the cause of the gospel. We serve our Lord Jesus Christ in serving each other – as salt and light in the world.

So, with those four 'G' words of our gospel purpose behind, beneath us, beside us and before us ... we GO ...

I said that there are four 'G' words here – Gift, Grace, Gathered and Good works – but there is actually a little hidden fifth one at the end of our Scripture. It is a sending word that is not noticed in some English translations. We are sent to go out into the world to live as people of this gift of grace.

This fifth and additional 'G' word is hidden in that last phrase in our English translations that reads, 'to be our way of life'. This is a translation of a common image that the Apostle Paul uses throughout his letters when he speaks of Christian life. He uses the image of 'walking'. We walk by faith. The actual Scripture says that we are 'created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, so that we might "WALK IN THEM"'.  
We 'GO' – that is the fifth 'G' word – we GO!

We walk in the way of good works. We go places, publicly bearing witness to God's gift of grace at work in us as earthen vessels as we walk by faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

People of the LCANZ, sisters and brothers in Christ gathered by the one Lord in the one faith of the one baptism, remember the gift of God – it's grace that unites us. So GO and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and teaching them to obey everything that the Lord has commanded you.

And remember, the Risen Lord – the giver of grace – is with you always, to the end of the age.

And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.