

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

“Free Grace” Theology

5 Ways It Diminishes the Gospel

WAYNE GRUDEM, PH.D.

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It is with some reluctance that I write this book. Many of the people who hold the Free Grace viewpoint that I disagree with in the pages that follow have been my friends for years, even decades. They strongly affirm the complete inerrancy of the Bible, the Trinity, the full deity of Christ, the substitutionary atonement of Christ for our sins, and dozens upon dozens of other important doctrinal convictions. Many of them lead exemplary Christian lives. They are genuine brothers and sisters in Christ, and I appreciate their friendship and their partnership in the work of God’s kingdom here on earth. Therefore I consider this book to be part of a serious, earnest discussion of a significant difference, but a difference that is still among friends.

Yet this book is about more than the Free Grace controversy. It is about the nature of the gospel that we proclaim in evangelism. The New Testament repeatedly emphasizes the need for repentance from sin (in the sense of an internal resolve to turn from sin) as a crucial part of genuine saving faith. As I worked on this book, I became increasingly concerned that much of modern evangelicalism has a tendency to avoid or water down any call for unbelievers to sincerely repent of their sins (not merely to “change their minds”) as part of coming to trust in Christ for forgiveness of those sins (see chapter 2).

This book also deals with assurance of salvation. How can I know if I’m really a born-again Christian, and how can I know that I will be saved for eternity? I’m concerned that there is considerable uncertainty about assurance in the evangelical world today, and therefore I have attempted to explain the New Testament material on assurance and also to treat sensitively the question of pastoral care for those who are wondering if they are truly saved (see chapter 3).

Finally, this book deals with the nature of saving faith in the New Testament, explaining that it is a fuller and richer concept than merely believing that what the Bible says is factually and historically true (though that is important). Saving faith involves coming into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, coming into his presence and deciding to place my trust in him as a living, divine person who sees and hears us every moment and who knows the deepest thoughts of my heart. I am concerned that this emphasis on

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placing our trust in the *person* of Christ is too often missing in our evangelism today (see chapter 4).

What I have found to be true in many previous theological disputes has also proven to be true in the dispute before us here: the Lord has several purposes in allowing a doctrinal controversy into his church. In particular, I suspect that the Lord would have us not only disagree graciously with those who hold the Free Grace position but also think carefully about our own understanding and practice regarding the nature of the gospel, repentance, saving faith, and assurance of salvation.

Many evangelicals today who have never heard of the Free Grace movement have unknowingly moved too far in the direction of Free Grace teaching anyway. They have become too timid about urging unbelievers to repent of their sins as they come to trust in Christ (in part because we live in a culture that would condemn any call for repentance as legalistic and judgmental), too vague about explaining what it is to trust in Christ personally, and too uncertain about how and when to give assurance of salvation to those who are part of our churches.

For all these reasons, I hope that this book will be useful for evangelical Christians today.

A. What is the Free Grace gospel?

The Free Grace position claims that we are justified *by faith alone*.¹ I have no disagreement with that statement in itself—in fact, justification by faith alone has been a primary belief of Protestants since the time of Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation.²

The problem comes when the Free Grace movement understands “alone,” in the phrase “justified by faith alone,” in a novel way. Protestants generally have taken “alone” to mean that nothing else *helps* or nothing else *contributes* in our obtaining justification from God. Our faith is the only thing that God requires of us—not good works, not offering

¹ For example, the “Covenant” that defines the doctrinal position of the Free Grace Alliance says, “The Grace of God in justification is an unconditional free gift,” and, “The sole means of receiving the free gift of eternal life is faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, whose substitutionary death on the cross fully satisfied the requirement for our justification.” Accessed January 19, 2015, <http://www.freegracealliance.com/covenant.htm>.

² See discussion below for evidence from many Protestant leaders. The phrase “justification by faith alone” captures the important disagreement between Protestants and Roman Catholics, who believe that we are justified by faith plus our use of the means of grace. In Protestant theology, *justification* is defined as follows: “Justification is an instantaneous legal act of God in which he (1) thinks of our sins as forgiven and Christ’s righteousness as belonging to us, and (2) declares us to be righteous in his sight.” Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 723

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some sacrifice, not performing some ritual or ceremony, not the use of some means of grace—just faith alone.

But Free Grace proponents have gone beyond the claim that God asks of us nothing more than faith when he justifies us. They have made an additional claim: that faith *occurs by itself* when a person is justified, in the sense that no other human actions necessarily accompany faith (such as repentance from sin or doing good works after we are justified).³

Then, because they argue that “nothing else must necessarily be present” with faith, the Free Grace movement teaches that it is wrong to say that:

repentance from sin must accompany faith

or

any other human activities necessarily result from faith, such as good works or continuing to believe.⁴

This Free Grace understanding of “justification by faith alone” leads to several significant pastoral practices, such as

In evangelism. Evangelistic messages generally should not include any call to repentance, in the sense of an inward resolve to turn away from sin (this is said to be adding “works” to faith).

In giving assurance to people who deny their faith. People who accurately understood the gospel and sincerely said that they believed in Christ at some time in the past but now say that they no longer believe in Christ are likely to be still saved, and we can assure them that they are saved (because justifying faith is a one-time act).

In giving warnings to people who persist in sinful conduct. A professing Christian’s sinful conduct should not ordinarily be used as a basis for warning the person that

³ Free Grace advocates certainly *encourage* good works as the “normal” and “expected” response to God’s saving grace, but they insist that no evident works must necessarily result from saving faith.

⁴ For example, the Covenant of the Free Grace Alliance says, “The Gospel of Grace should always be presented with such clarity and simplicity that no impression is left that justification requires any step, response, or action in addition to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.” Their literature then argues that repentance from sin is not a necessary part of saving faith (most of them define *repentance* as just a “change of mind” and not an inner resolve to turn from sin). They also argue that good works should not be said to necessarily follow from saving faith. (I provide documentation of these points from Free Grace authors in the following pages.)

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he or she might not be saved (rather, we should say that the person is foolishly not living according to who he or she really is).

In giving assurance to people who continue to produce good works. A professing Christian's righteous and godly conduct of life ("good works") should not ordinarily be used as one basis for giving that person assurance of salvation.

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Where did the modern Free Grace movement come from? As far as I can tell, it stems primarily from a minority view among the faculty members at Dallas Theological Seminary. More particularly, it stems from an aggressive promotion of the Free Grace viewpoint by Zane Hodges (1932–2008), who taught New Testament at Dallas Theological Seminary for twenty-seven years, from 1959 to 1986.

But that recent origin does not mean that the movement is insignificant. Although only a minority of Dallas Seminary professors held a Free Grace view, Zane Hodges was an exceptionally persuasive teacher, and every year some students adopted his view. Then, through these students, the Free Grace movement gained a remarkable worldwide influence, especially in discouraging Christians from including any explicit call to repentance in their presentations of the gospel. (I have been surprised how many Christian leaders in various parts of the world have said to me, "I'm glad you're writing about this.")

B. Why I do not use the term *Lordship Salvation*.

Some readers may wonder why I do not use the term *Lordship Salvation* in discussing this topic. In fact, the matters that I discuss here have in previous years often been referred to as the "Lordship Salvation controversy."⁵ But as I researched this topic, it became increasingly apparent that the phrase *Lordship Salvation* was a decidedly misleading and unfortunate summary of the central issues involved.⁶ In brief, popular terms, the controversy was sometimes summarized as follows.

⁵ E.g., note the titles of these books: Zane Hodges, *Absolutely Free! A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1989); Kenneth Gentry, *Lord of the Saved: Getting to the Heart of the Lordship Debate* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1992; repr. Fountain Inn, SC: Victorious House, 2001); Michael Horton, ed., *Christ the Lord: The Reformation and Lordship Salvation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1992; repr. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008); Charles Bing, *Lordship Salvation: A Biblical Evaluation and Response* (Maitland, FL: Xulon Press, 2010).

⁶ I was glad to see that John MacArthur Jr. said bluntly, "I don't like the term *lordship salvation*. I reject the connotation intended by those who coined the phrase. It insinuates that a submissive heart is extraneous or supplementary to saving faith. Although I have reluctantly used the term to describe my views, it is a concession to popular usage." John F. MacArthur Jr., *Faith Works: The Gospel According to the Apostles* (Dallas: Word, 1993), 23. The habit of referring to this as the "Lordship Salvation controversy" probably

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- 1) Some people believe that you can accept Jesus *as Savior but not as Lord* (the Free Grace position).
- 2) Other people believe that you have to accept Jesus *as both Savior and Lord* (those who do not hold the Free Grace position but rather what was termed the “Lordship Salvation” position)

The problem is that neither side will ever win or lose the argument when it is framed in those terms. The Free Grace supporters who hold the first position still affirm strongly that Jesus is in fact Lord over the entire universe and over all of our lives, even though we imperfectly submit to his lordship.⁷ And those on the non-Free Grace side, those who hold the second position, all agree that our submission to Christ’s lordship is imperfect in this life.⁸

So both sides agree that Jesus is Lord of our lives in some sense and is not fully Lord of our lives in another sense. Trying to define precisely *how much* Jesus has to be acknowledged as Lord for genuine saving faith becomes an increasingly muddled task, and it simply does not contribute much clarity to the discussion. Therefore I do not plan to discuss the question of the lordship of Christ in the rest of this book. I do not think that is the best way to focus the issue.

In addition, when Free Grace proponents refer to the position that disagrees with them as the “Lordship Salvation” position, they wrongly suggest that it is an unusual or minority view that seeks to add the idea of lordship to the ordinary idea of salvation. But,

stems from a two-part article in the once-popular magazine *Eternity* 10.9 (September 1959), “Must Christ Be Lord to Be Savior? No . . . Yes,” 13–18, 36, 48, with Everett Harrison arguing the *no* viewpoint and John Stott arguing the *yes* viewpoint on the opposite pages. Although the title of that article pointed to some differences between the two authors, it did so in an imprecise and confusing way, for Stott never claims that *perfect* submission to Christ’s lordship is necessary for saving faith but says that “in true faith there is an element of submission” (p. 17), and Harrison affirms that “Christ is Lord by virtue of resurrection whether anyone acknowledges it personally or not” (p. 16). The article would have focused the discussion more precisely if it had asked, “Is repentance from sin a necessary part of saving faith?” (Harrison: no; Stott: yes), and “Will good works and continuing to believe necessarily follow from saving faith?” (Harrison: no; Stott: yes).

⁷ Charles Bing says, “Though both the Lordship Salvation position and the Free Grace position agree that Christ’s Lordship is essential for salvation, there is disagreement over how an unsaved person must respond to Christ’s Lordship in order to be saved. . . . Jesus is Lord of all regardless of one’s submission to Him.” *Lordship Salvation*, 178–79.

⁸ John MacArthur says, “I am certain that while some understand more than others, no one who is saved fully understands all the implications of Jesus’ lordship at the moment of conversion.” But he adds, in distinction from the Free Grace position, “I am, however, equally certain that no one can be saved who is either unwilling to obey Christ or consciously, callously rebellious against His Lordship.” *The Gospel According to Jesus: What Is Authentic Faith?*, anniversary ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 15.

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in fact, what the Free Grace movement calls the “Lordship Salvation” view has just been the ordinary, mainstream, evangelical Protestant view since the Reformation. It is not a novel or minority view at all, for it has been held by all the main branches of Protestantism (see chapter 1).

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My own conclusion is that there are important differences concerning two other matters:

- 1) whether repentance from sin (in the sense of remorse for sin and an internal resolve to forsake it) is necessary for saving faith, and
- 2) whether good works and continuing to believe necessarily follow from saving faith.

The two positions clearly and explicitly disagree on the answers to those questions. And it is on those two questions that the debate should be focused. In my judgment, any further discussion that refers to this as the “Lordship Salvation controversy” will just muddy the waters. In the material that follows, I will simply refer to the two positions as the “Free Grace” position and the “historic Protestant” position (or, at times, the “non-Free Grace” position).

At this point someone might ask why I refer to the position I am opposing as the “Free Grace” position. After all, don’t all Protestants believe in free grace? My response is that, yes, all orthodox Protestants believe in free grace, but it is always courteous to refer to a position that you disagree with by a descriptive term that the other side would choose for itself, and the term “Free Grace” (capitalized) is commonly used by the two major organizations that promote this view, both the Free Grace Alliance⁹ and the Grace Evangelical Society.¹⁰

By the same token, I hope that no reviewer of this book will refer to my position as the “Lordship Salvation” position, for I explicitly disavow that label as misleading and confusing (see above). Throughout this book, I regularly refer to my own position as the “historic Protestant” position (or sometimes as the “non-Free Grace” position), and I attempt to demonstrate in chapter 1 that I am arguing for the viewpoint held historically by the most influential leaders and statements of faith in the various branches of historic

⁹ See their website: <http://www.freegracealliance.com>.

¹⁰ See their website: <http://www.faithalone.org>. It is common in Christian circles to refer to groups by names they would take for themselves, such as “Baptists” (even though nearly all churches believe in baptism), or “Congregationalists” (even though all churches have congregations).

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Protestantism, including representative Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican, Baptist, Methodist, and Pentecostal groups.¹¹

However, my concerns with the Free Grace movement are not limited to theological differences on those two points above. I am convinced that the theological position held by the Free Grace movement is also inconsistent with *historic* Protestant convictions and has harmful consequences in the church today as well. Therefore, I have organized my concerns into five chapters, and in those chapters these two differences over repentance and good works will surface again and again. The first chapter deals with the history of Protestantism, and the remaining four deal with my concerns about the practical consequences of Free Grace teaching.

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¹¹ Although my book *Systematic Theology* makes clear that I personally hold doctrines that would place me in the Reformed and Baptist theological traditions (with sympathy for some teachings of the charismatic movement), the position I am arguing for here is more "historic Protestant" than uniquely representative of any of those three traditions.