

LORDSHIP SALVATION AND FREE GRACE

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to shed light on some of the problematic issues regarding the erroneous doctrine known as “Lordship Salvation.” Lordship Salvation teaches that a person can only be saved by accepting Christ as his Savior and Lord — meaning submitting to His lordship through a commitment to obedience. In contrast, “free grace”¹ is the view that an individual is saved by simply believing (or trusting) in Christ for salvation. This paper examines Lordship Salvation from a traditional “free grace”² perspective. Lordship Salvation will be examined as it relates to several connected matters.

THE LORD AND HIS LORDSHIP

Lordship Salvation teaching states that “the call to surrender to the lordship of Jesus is part and parcel of His invitation to salvation... It is an unconditional surrender, a willingness to do anything the Lord demands... salvation is both free and costly... in a sense we pay the ultimate price for salvation when our sinful self is nailed to the cross. It is a total abandonment of self-will... And it denotes implicit obedience, full surrender to the lordship of Christ.”³ Lordship Salvation teachers have stated it like this: “We may believe in the deity and the salvation of Christ, and acknowledge ourselves to be sinners in urgent need of His salvation; but all this does not make us a Christian. There is a personal response which we must make to Jesus Christ, committing ourselves unreservedly to Him as our Saviour and Lord... In order to follow Christ, we have to deny ourselves, to crucify ourselves, to lose ourselves. The full, inexorable demand of Jesus Christ is... to a vigorous, absolute commitment. He invites us to make Him our Lord... To make Christ Lord is to bring every department of our public and private lives under His control. This includes our career... our marriage and our home...”⁴

In God’s Word, the terms “Lord” and “Lordship” are typically used to describe the deity of Jesus Christ. When we accepted Christ as our Savior, we accepted Him for who He is, the *LORD* Jesus Christ, the Son of God.⁵ It is true that “Jesus is both Savior and Lord (Luke 2:11), and no true believer would ever dispute that.”⁶ Submission to the lordship of Christ is a major issue that *believers* must face daily in their Christian lives. But lordship is not the issue that must be presented to the unbeliever for salvation. It is neither necessary, nor even possible, for unbelievers (who do not have the Holy Spirit), to completely yield their lives to the lordship of Christ as demanded by teachers of Lordship Salvation. Scripture admonishes believers to yield themselves to Christ’s lordship with regard to sanctification. Free grace promotes Lordship

¹ Dr. Charles Bing wrote an excellent article explaining “free grace” soteriology. See: “[What is Free Grace theology? GraceNotes - no. 67](#)” by Dr. Bing.

² Within theological circles today, there are two basic views of “free grace.” This paper is written from the traditional or normative view of “free grace.” This view holds that in order to be saved a person needs to trust in the substitutionary death of Jesus on the cross. An aberrant view of “free grace” claims that trusting in Jesus’ death on the cross is not necessary for salvation. This has become known as the “crossless gospel.” For a comparison of the traditional “free grace” view and the aberrant view see [The Free Grace gospel — Clarifying the Issues](#) by Bob Nyberg.

³ John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The gospel According to Jesus*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), 112, 140.

⁴ John R. Stott, *Basic Christianity*, (Chicago: Inter-varsity Press, 1965), 109, 114-115.”

⁵ Jn. 1:1-3, 14, 18, 49; 8:58; 10:30, 36-38; 11:25-26; 14:7-12; 20:27-31.

⁶ MacArthur, *The gospel According to Jesus*, 27.

Sanctification, but it opposes Lordship *Salvation*.

SAVING FAITH

Theologians often use the term “saving faith.” However, that term is not found in God’s Word. In an article titled “The Heresy Is in the Adjectives,” Dave Breese raised concerns about the term “saving faith.” Dave wrote, “There is, strictly speaking, no such thing as saving faith. This implies that the faith which saves us has some kind of a deeper quality than ordinary faith.... The idea of ‘saving faith’ is often an attempt to freight [load] the word faith into meaning something beyond the fact that we believe in a certain thing. This view many times expands faith into ‘doing something’ which is at best an implication but not the essence of faith.”⁷

Teachers of Lordship Salvation claim that “saving faith” has qualities far beyond *belief* or *trust* in the Lord Jesus Christ. According to Lordship Salvation, the term “faith” includes a wide area of meaning. For example: “Saving faith is no simple thing. It has many dimensions. ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus’ is a massive command. It contains a hundred other things. Unless we see this, the array of conditions for salvation in the New Testament will be utterly perplexing.”⁸ “The New Testament lays before us a vast array of conditions for final salvation. Not only initial repentance and faith, but perseverance in both...”⁹ “There are all sorts of conditions that must be met for someone to be saved. Chief among them is that we must have faith in Christ. The Reformed view does, in a narrow sense, see obedience as a ‘condition’ (but never the ground) of justification.”¹⁰ “Saving faith... is inseparable from repentance, surrender, and supernatural eagerness to obey. ...salvation is a gift, yet it costs everything.”¹¹ “Faith is synonymous with obedience.”¹² “Saving faith is a commitment to leave sin and follow Jesus Christ at all costs. Jesus takes no one unwilling to come on those terms. ...there must be a willingness to obey... A person not willing to turn from sin, possessions, false religion, or selfishness will find he cannot turn to Christ in faith...”¹³ The pearl merchant (Mt. 13:45, 46) in buying treasure “will liquidate everything to get it. His heritage, his self-righteousness, his money, his education, and all his most precious possessions are worthless compared to the wealth he will obtain. He is glad to give it all up for the kingdom. That is the nature of saving faith... Saving faith retains no privileges. It clings to no cherished sins, no treasured possessions, no secret indulgences. It is an unconditional surrender, a willingness to do anything the Lord demands.”¹⁴

In contrast to the teaching of Lordship Salvation, God’s Word teaches that by grace we are “saved through faith” (Eph. 2:8). Faith is a trust or reliance on Him who is the Truth. By placing our trust in the finished work of our Lord Jesus Christ for salvation from sin, we are saved without any other conditions. The *object* of our faith, not the *quality* of our faith, is crucial. Dave Breese emphasized this point when he wrote: “Faith is ‘real’ or saving only, yes only, because it has the proper object. A ‘deep,’ ‘genuine,’ ‘high-quality’ faith in a rotting rope ladder is worthless by comparison to a simple faith in a strong, solid staircase. Yes, a flicker of faith

⁷ Dave Breese, *The Heresy Is in the Adjectives*.

⁸ John Piper, *Desiring God* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1986), p. 65.

⁹ Michael Horton, *Introducing Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), p. 182.

¹⁰ R. C. Sproul, *Willing to Believe* (Baker Books, 2002), p. 179.

¹¹ MacArthur, *The gospel According to Jesus*, 31.

¹² Marc Mueller, “Syllabus,” 20. Cited in Charles C. Bing, *Lordship Salvation*, 21.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 87-88.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 139-140.

(which may not be thought of as faith at all by its possessor) in a marble staircase is infinitely more valuable than a long, strong faith in aged hemp which has been eaten away by time. The ‘assumption’ that the staircase will support your weight is better than the passionate, tear-stained, profound conviction that the rotting rope will hold you.”¹⁵

Free grace does not load the word “faith” with a bunch of needless baggage. Faith is simply a person’s trust in the Savior for salvation. This trust presupposes or includes the idea of “repentance” which is Biblically defined as a “change of mind.”

REPENTANCE

Those teaching Lordship Salvation say that repentance is necessary for salvation. However, their definition of “repentance” is based upon English usage of the word rather than a true Biblical definition. Lordship Salvation teachers say that repentance “is more than just sorrow for the past; repentance is a change of mind and heart, a new life of denying self and serving the Savior as king in self’s place...”¹⁶ “Repentance... involves a complete change of heart, attitude, interest, and direction. It is a conversion in every sense of the word.”¹⁷ “We cannot follow Christ without forsaking sin. Moreover, repentance is a definite turn from every thought, word, deed and habit known to be wrong... Secondly, there must be a renunciation of self... we must renounce the very principle of self-will which lies at the root of all acts of sin.”¹⁸

Many holding to the traditional free grace view accept the fact that God commands all men to repent.¹⁹ But “repentance for salvation” means “a change of mind or attitude” concerning God, Christ, dead works, and sin.” Dr. Robert Lightner wrote:

The word *repentance* means a change of mind.... There is no question about it: repentance is necessary for salvation. However, Scripture views repentance as included in believing and not as an additional and separate condition to faith. All who have trusted Christ as Savior have changed their minds regarding Him and their sin.²⁰

Repentance in Scripture has to do with a change of mind. Evangelicals agree no one can be saved who does not change his mind about himself and his need, his sin which separates him from God, and about Christ as the only Savior.²¹

Dr. Charles Ryrie concurs with Dr. Lightner:

The only kind of repentance that saves is a change of mind about Jesus Christ. People can weep; people can resolve to turn from their past sins; but those things in themselves cannot save. The only kind of repentance that saves anyone, anywhere, anytime is a change of mind about Jesus Christ. The sense of sin and sorrow because of sin may stir up a person’s mind or conscience so that he or she realizes the need for a Savior, but if

¹⁵ Dave Breese, *Saving Faith*

¹⁶ J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, (Chicago: Inter-Varsity Press, 1961) 71. (See also pp.72-73)

¹⁷ MacArthur, *The gospel According to Jesus*, 32. (See also p. 165)

¹⁸ Stott, *Basic Christianity*, 112-115. (This sounds as though a change in one’s lifestyle is a required condition for salvation).

¹⁹ Lk. 24:47; Acts 17:30; 26:20; 2 Pet. 3:9.

²⁰ Robert Lightner, *Sin, The Savior, and Salvation: The Theology of Everlasting Life*. (Nashville, Tennessee), p. 167

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 212

there is no change of mind about Jesus Christ there will be no salvation.²²

In free grace, “repentance” is included in the concept of faith. They are two sides of the same coin. Repentance and faith are together included in the only condition for salvation.

The apostle John clearly spelled out the purpose for the Gospel account that he wrote. He stated, “And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name (Jn. 20:30-31).” He wrote his Gospel in order to present the way of salvation. And yet the words “repent” or “repentance” cannot be found in his Gospel. That leaves us with only two options: 1) either repentance is not a requirement for salvation or 2) the concept of repentance is carried within the idea of “faith” or “to believe.” Lordship Salvation is faced with a dilemma. They define repentance as “turning from sin” rather than simply “a change of mind.” Yet nowhere does John use the term “repent” or “repentance” in his Gospel even though his stated purpose is to present the way of salvation. In contrast, Traditional free grace teachers do not face a dilemma since “repentance” and “faith” are two sides of the same coin.

Traditional free grace teaches that an unbeliever cannot trust in Christ without “changing his mind” through the convicting/convincing power of the Holy Spirit. The reason for this is that unbelievers have serious misconceptions that need to be changed about God, Christ, sin and/or human works. They must repent or change their mind. For example, an unbeliever who does not see himself as a sinner (Lk. 13:1-5; Rev. 9:21; 16:9, 11) and guilty before a holy God, must repent in order to be saved (Acts 20:21; Rev. 16:9, 11). People who think that human works (Heb. 6:1; Rev. 9:20) must be added to the finished work of Christ in order to be saved must also repent or change their minds.

While free grace rejects Lordship Salvation, it clearly teaches Lordship Sanctification. Free grace teachers adamantly insist that it is God’s will for believers to turn from sin and forsake it in order to grow spiritually. God desires that His children be conformed to the image of Christ. We are to live holy lives, separated from sin. But such changes in the believer’s lifestyle follow after justification. Such changes do not result in justification. Demanding such changes in order to be justified is clearly salvation by works. Only faith/repentance (aka a change of mind) can bring about justification.

Lordship Salvation puts the cart before the horse. It mixes the works of sanctification (or the fruit of the Holy Spirit) with the faith/repentance that results in justification.

Lance Latham was exactly right when he wrote: “We cannot add fresh law obedience as a condition of salvation. And I fear that this is often done under the name of ‘repentance.’ No, God accepts the ungodly sinner, who puts his faith in Christ crucified and risen, ‘without the works of the law.’ Telling the sinner to forsake his sins, in other words, to do good from now on, is the same as telling him to obey the law. Besides he cannot do this. We would put a condition impossible to obey.”²³

DISCIPLESHIP AND FOLLOWING CHRIST

Teachers of Lordship Salvation equate becoming a disciple (or deciding to follow Jesus) with the

²² Charles Ryrie, *So Great Salvation: What It Means to Believe In Jesus Christ* (Wheaton, Illinois, 1989), pp. 94-95

²³ Lance B. Latham, personal letter written to George Davison, April 11, 1964.

experience of initial salvation (aka justification). They say that to become a “disciple” is to become a “believer.” “The gospel Jesus proclaimed was a call to discipleship, a call to follow Him in submissive obedience...”²⁴ Concerning the rich young ruler (Mt. 19:16-22), “No matter what he believed, since he was unwilling to forsake all, he could not be a disciple of Christ. Salvation is for those who are willing to forsake everything.”²⁵ “Salvation is for people who hate their sin and want to turn from the things of this life..., who want to turn around, to live for God’s glory.”²⁶ “Forsaking oneself for Christ’s sake is not an optional step of discipleship subsequent to conversion; it is the sine qua non of saving faith.”²⁷ According to Lordship Salvation, “...the evangelistic call of Jesus was essentially a call to repentance and radical discipleship.”²⁸

Once again, Lordship Salvation faces a huge dilemma. Judas was a disciple, but he was not a believer. Being a disciple and being a believer is not the same thing. A disciple is a learner or a follower of a teacher. As a traveling rabbi, Jesus had disciples, but they were not all “following” Him to the same degree. Some were more peripheral followers (Jn. 6:60-71). Some were actually unbelievers such as Judas. Others, including Joseph of Arimathea, were believers who were limited in their “commitment” (Jn. 12:42-43; 19:38; Mk. 9:38-40). Then there were the 12 (minus Judas) and the 70 who were disciples more committed to Christ’s lordship over them. Jesus commanded His followers to “make disciples of all nations” (Mt. 28:19). Making disciples involves both evangelism and instruction. It is one thing to evangelize the sinner, and another to establish or “disciple” the saint. Salvation is the free gift of eternal life, but discipleship is a costly process of instruction and discipline. By blurring the scriptural distinction between spiritual birth and spiritual growth, Lordship Salvation offers the sinner a “free gift” which can only be “purchased” at an enormous cost to the recipient. This is a gospel of works, not grace.

THE GOSPEL

A popular teacher of Lordship Salvation claims that “the gospel... calls not simply for the acquiescence of the mind, but for the full surrender of the heart, soul, mind, and strength. (Mk. 12:30)...”²⁹ He says a message that “does not require a turning from sin and an affirmation of the lordship of Christ is a false gospel that will not save.”³⁰ Another Lordship Salvation teacher writes, “In our presentation of Christ’s gospel... we need to lay... stress on the cost of following Christ, and make sinners face it soberly before we urge them to respond to the message of free forgiveness. In common honesty, we must not conceal the fact that free forgiveness in one sense will cost everything; or else our evangelizing becomes a sort of confidence trick. And where there is no clear knowledge, and hence no realistic recognition of the real claims that Christ makes, there can be no repentance, and therefore no salvation.”³¹

How can someone claim with a straight face, that free forgiveness will cost everything?! If it is free, then by definition it does not cost the recipient. And if it costs everything, then it is anything but free. This is nothing more than theological double talk! The actual “confidence trick” is peddling a so-called free gospel that costs everything.

²⁴ MacArthur, *The gospel According to Jesus*, 21.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 78.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 84.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 135.

²⁸ Wallis, J. “Many to Belief, But Few to Obedience.” *Sojourners* (March 1976): 21.

²⁹ MacArthur, *The gospel According to Jesus*, 68.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 88.

³¹ J. I. Packer, *Evangelism*, 73.

The teachers of Lordship Salvation make no distinction between the gospel of the kingdom which was proclaimed to the nation of Israel before the cross and the gospel of grace which we proclaim to the unsaved in order that they might believe and be saved. The gospel of the kingdom was preached for some time before Jesus even told His disciples about His coming death, burial and resurrection (Mt.16:21). The disciples neither understood nor believed these events until after they took place (Lk.18:34; 24:25-27, 44-48). And yet these truths of the finished work of Christ are basic and essential elements of the gospel of grace which we preach today. Traditional free grace is based upon literal, historical-grammatical hermeneutics which takes the Word of God at face value. It is the logical result of a dispensational understanding of Scripture.³²

Lordship Salvation views “good works” as a condition for salvation. One Lordship Salvation writer clearly states that “...good works may be said to be a condition of salvation in that they accompany genuine faith.” He continues by stating that works “are never a meritorious grounds for justification.” The author distinguishes between two kinds of conditions for salvation: 1) “necessary conditions” (good works) and 2) “meritorious conditions.”³³

Free grace does not make that distinction. Free grace teaches that God *freely* justifies “the ungodly” by His grace alone, without works of any kind.³⁴ The Gospel of John makes it clear that salvation is by simple faith and not by works.³⁵ The gospel of Lordship Salvation is clearly man-centered rather than Christ-centered. In contrast, the gospel as presented in God’s Word has to do with His surrender, not ours; His giving all for us, not our giving anything to Him. It speaks of His cross, not our cross; what He has done for us, not what we must do for Him.

Teachers of Lordship Salvation confuse the *fruit* resulting from the gospel with the *message* proclaimed through the gospel. Free grace makes a distinct difference between initial justification and progressive sanctification. Lordship Salvation teachers blur these two aspects of salvation in their presentation of the gospel to the unbeliever. Scripture teaches that God justifies the ungodly (Rom.4:4-5) by grace, through faith alone. When this happens the righteousness of Christ is imputed (or reckoned) to the believer’s account.

ASSURANCE OF SALVATION

Teachers of Lordship Salvation say that “genuine believers do not receive Christ without continuing in Him. They do not hear His Word and fail to listen to it. They do not know His commandments and fail to keep them... The only validation of salvation is a life of obedience. It is the only possible proof that a person really knows Jesus Christ.”³⁶ “Spiritual humiliation is of the essence of true religion. Those who lack it are not genuine Christians... Spiritual humiliation is the essence of self-denial... First a man must deny his worldly inclinations, and forsake all sinful pleasures. Second, he must deny his natural self-righteousness and self-centeredness...”³⁷ The same writer also stated, “I am not going to help Christians who have grown spiritually cold

³² See *So Great Salvation* (pp. 37-41) and *Freely By His grace* (pp 497-551).

³³ “Why Some Calvinists Teach That Good Works are a Condition of Salvation” by Bob Wilkin *grace in Focus* July–August 1997, 3-4.

³⁴ Rom. 3:19-4:5; 5:8, 9; 1 Cor. 1:17, 18, 21-23; 15:1-4; Gal. 2:16; Eph. 2:8, 9; Col. 1:13-14; (These and many other Scriptures make the gospel simple and clear. Such statements of truth, taught repeatedly in Acts and the Epistles, should be the foundation for interpreting those portions of Scripture that are more obscure and thus more difficult to interpret).

³⁵ John 3:15-18, 36; 5:24, 38; 6:29, 40, 47; 7:38-39; 9:35-38; 11:25, 26; 12:36; 14:10-12; 17:8; 20:29, 31.

³⁶ MacArthur, *The gospel According to Jesus*, 194.

³⁷ Jonathan Edward’s, *The Experience That Counts*, (London: grace Publications Trust, 1994), 96.

to obtain assurance of their salvation... I have already argued that it is not God's plan that such Christians should have assurance...³⁸

The teaching of Lordship Salvation makes assurance impossible. How could anyone possibly know whether or not they were *genuinely* saved? This view of assurance stands opposed to the teaching of the apostle John who boldly stated, "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life (1 Jn. 5:13)." Lordship Salvation undermines a believer's assurance of salvation. This fact is clearly seen in how they teach basic doctrines such as the lordship of Christ, saving faith, repentance, discipleship, and the gospel.

How many believers can confidently say that they have fully obeyed the two greatest commandments (Mk.12:28-34)? How many can say that they have denied their "worldly inclinations" and "self-centeredness" and forsaken "all sinful pleasures?" If a lost sinner must look to himself to see whether or not he meets all the many "conditions" that Lordship Salvation requires to be saved, how can he ever have assurance of salvation? The numerous conditions of Lordship Salvation are so subjective and indefinite in nature that they cannot be quantified. Just how much commitment is enough commitment? How many areas in a person's life must be surrendered to Christ in order to have even the slightest hope for assurance? How long does a believer need to progress in his walk with the Lord in order to have assurance of salvation? How can any believer ever know with absolute certainty that the quantity and quality of his works are actually sufficient evidence of possessing eternal life? Yet according to God's Word, we can know that we do indeed have eternal life (1 Jn. 5:13). Our hope rests upon what God declares in His Word (Jn. 3:16).

Without assurance the believer is insecure in his position of acceptance before God. That which is foundational to his spiritual health and growth is missing. "Good works are not the grounds of assurance... assurance is the grounds for good works!"³⁹ Why should we look to our works for assurance of justification when justification is for the one who does not work (Rom. 4:4-5)? Traditional free grace teaches that our hope for eternal life is in Christ alone, by grace alone, through faith alone, and based on Scripture alone. That is the foundation for our assurance of salvation. Assurance is diminished in direct proportion to the added conditions required by those advocating works as the evidence of salvation. Sadly, a gospel of works is the foundation that Lordship Salvation is built upon. Without an assurance of salvation, the believer tends toward self-introspection, legalism, anxiety, and discouragement which hinders genuine spiritual growth.

CONCLUSION

Lordship Salvation often incorrectly defines many key terms such as *faith*, *lordship*, *repentance*, *discipleship*, and *the gospel* in an unbiblical manner. Or these terms are misapplied in such a way as to distort the gospel message by adding works to the only requirement for salvation which is faith. Lordship Salvation claims that trusting only in Christ and His finished work for our salvation is NOT sufficient. Lordship Salvation teachers say that "*saving faith*" includes total surrender, repentance, and obedience⁴⁰. Therefore the unbeliever must completely submit/surrender their whole life to the *lordship* of Christ. This idea of submission

³⁸ Ibid., 71.

³⁹ Zane Hodges, *The gospel Under Siege*, Second Edition, (Dallas: Redencion Viva, 1992), 16.

⁴⁰ But when pressed on how much obedience is enough obedience, then they will begin to walk back that requirement saying that the lost sinner must at least be willing to obey.

includes a *repentance* defined as changing direction or turning away “from every thought, word, deed and habit known to be wrong.” According to Lordship Salvation, *discipleship* must be presented to the unbeliever as a part of the *gospel*. The unbeliever must make a commitment to complete surrender or obedience in order to be saved. The so-called free gift of salvation will end up costing the recipient everything.

In contrast, free grace teaches that the free gift of salvation is extremely costly to the Savior but absolutely free to the sinner who receives it by faith. Justification is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, for the glory of God alone. Traditional free grace defines *faith* for salvation as simply trusting in Christ as our only Savior from sin. Faith includes *repentance* which is a change of mind about sin, salvation and the Savior. With regard to sin, we have truly offended God and stand guilty before His court of justice. With regard to salvation, there is nothing that we can do to save ourselves including promising to forsake our sin and to obey Him completely. With regard to salvation, Jesus’ death on the cross paid for our sin and only by trusting in His payment on our behalf can we be saved. The gospel according to free grace is about the finished work of Christ — his death, burial and resurrection. The gospel is the power of God to salvation to those who believe. Salvation is by faith alone, apart from any works.

SUPPLEMENTARY READING

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