

The Free Grace Fracture

By Bob Nyberg

Myth: Free grace theology began in the 1980's as a response to John MacArthur's book *The Gospel According to Jesus*.

If you do a search on the internet for the phrase "free grace theology," you will come across this popular myth. In reality, free grace theology has been around a lot longer than that. For instance, William Newell, Harry Ironside and Lance Latham wrote about free grace theology long before the lordship salvation controversy came to the forefront within Christendom.

William R. Newell (1868-1953) wrote: "to preach full surrender to an unsaved man as the way of salvation will just make a hateful Pharisee out of him."¹

Dr. Harry Ironside (1876-1951) wrote: "When the revivalist comes promising salvation to those "who make a full surrender" of all that they have to God, and who "pay the price of full salvation," he is preaching another gospel, for the price was paid on Calvary's cross and the work that saves is finished. It was Christ Jesus who made the full surrender, when He yielded Himself unto death for us that we might be redeemed from the curse of the broken law and forever saved from the judgment to come upon all who refuse His grace."²

Lance Latham (1894-1985) wrote: "Surely we must recognize WHO HE IS, or we will die in our sins (John 8:24). But this is vastly different from making Him your Lord in your life, in other words, promising to obey the rest of your life. This latter is preaching 'works.'"³

Long before these men wrote on the subject, another free grace theologian took pen in hand and scribed the memorable words, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. (Paul the Apostle; Ephesians 2:8-9)"

However, John MacArthur's books on lordship salvation did evoke a response from free grace advocates. In 1989, Charles Ryrie wrote *So Great Salvation: What It Means to Believe In Jesus Christ*. In the same year, Zane Hodges wrote *A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation: Absolutely Free*. In 1991, Robert Lightner wrote *Sin, The Savior, and Salvation: The Theology of Everlasting Life*. All three of these men were professors at Dallas Theological Seminary.

Hodges, Ryrie and Lightner all represent free grace theology and oppose lordship salvation. But there are some differences between them. This is especially true regarding how they view repentance. Both Charles Ryrie and Robert Lightner insist that repentance is a requirement for salvation. In contrast, Zane Hodges says that repentance is not a requirement for salvation.

Charles Ryrie states:

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

¹ Lance B. Latham, *The Two Gospels*, (Rolling Meadows, Ill 1984), p. 45

² Dr. Harry Ironside, A Gospel Tract Entitled: *Another Gospel*

³ Latham, p. 47

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 there is no change of mind about Jesus Christ there will be no salvation.⁴

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.⁵

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.⁶

Dr. Lightner was wrong about one point. Not all Evangelicals agree that repentance is necessary for salvation.

Zane Hodges insists:

Faith alone (not repentance *and* faith) is the sole condition for justification and eternal life.⁷

There can be no compromise on this point if we wish to preserve and to proclaim the biblical truth of *sola fide*. To make repentance a condition for eternal salvation is nothing less than a regression toward Roman Catholic dogma.⁸

At first, this difference between Ryrie-Lightner and Hodges was seen as a minor issue. However, those minor cracks in the free grace dam have turned into a significant fracture within this movement today. Zane Hodges and the leadership of The Grace Evangelical Society maintain that a person can be saved without believing in Christ's substitutionary death on the cross. This teaching has become known as "the crossless gospel." However, I prefer the term "minimalist gospel" since Hodges is dealing with the "minimum requirements" a person needs to believe in order to be saved.

In 2000, Zane Hodges wrote an article entitled, "How to Lead a Person to Christ, Part 1: The Content of our Message."⁹ The article appeared in the *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*. In this article Zane presents a "Desert Island Scenario." He wrote:

Let me begin with a strange scenario. Try to imagine an unsaved person marooned on a tiny, uninhabited island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. He has never heard about Christianity

⁴ Charles Ryrie, *So Great Salvation: What It Means to Believe In Jesus Christ* (Wheaton, Illinois, 1989), pp. 94-95

⁵ Robert Lightner, *Sin, The Savior, and Salvation: The Theology of Everlasting Life*. (Nashville, Tennessee), p. 167

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 212

⁷ Zane Hodges, *A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation: Absolutely Free* (Dallas, Texas, 1989), p. 144

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 145

⁹ <http://www.faithalone.org/journal/2000ii/Hodges.htm>

in his life. One day a wave washes a fragment of paper up onto the beach. It is wet but still partly readable.

On that paper are the words of John 6:43-47. But the only readable portions are: “Jesus therefore answered and said to them” (v 43) and “Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life” (v 47).

Now suppose that our unsaved man somehow becomes convinced that this person called Jesus can guarantee his eternal future, since He promises everlasting life. In other words, he believes Jesus’ words in John 6:47. Is he saved?

I suspect that there are some grace people who would say that this man is not saved because he doesn’t know enough. For example, he doesn’t know that Jesus died for his sins on the cross and rose again the third day. Needless to say, there is a lot more he doesn’t know either, such as the doctrine of the Trinity, the eternal Sonship of Jesus or the doctrine of the virgin birth.

But why is he *not* saved if he believes the promise of Jesus’ words? It is precisely the ability of Jesus to guarantee eternal life that makes Him the Christ in the Johannine sense of that term.

Is it necessary to believe in Christ’s work on the cross in order to be saved? Zane says, “no!” He continues:

The Gospel of John is the only book in our New Testament canon that explicitly declares its purpose to be evangelistic. Of course, I am thinking of the famous theme statement found in John 20:30-31, where we read: “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.”

This statement does not affirm the necessity of believing in our Lord’s substitutionary atonement. If by the time of the writing of John’s Gospel, it was actually necessary to believe this, then it would have been not only simple, but essential, to say so.

Neither explicitly nor implicitly does the Gospel of John teach that a person must understand the cross to be saved. It just does not teach this. If we say that it does, we are reading something into the text and not reading something out of it!

What is my point? That we should not preach the cross of Christ to men? Not at all.... Instead, I am arguing that we need to focus on the core issue in bringing men and women to faith and eternal life. What is that core issue?

Very simply it is this: We want people to believe that Jesus guarantees their eternal destiny. Of course, we would like them to believe a lot more than this, but this at least must be believed. Our failure to clearly define our goal in evangelism can have a negative or impeding effect on our efforts to lead people to simple faith in Christ.

According to Zane, the core issue is not the substitutionary death of Christ on the cross for sin. The core issue is that mankind lacks eternal life and they need to believe that Jesus guarantees their eternal destiny.

Remember that repentance is not a requirement for salvation in Hodges view. But Ryrie and Lightner insist that the lost sinner needs to change their mind about sin, and their own ability to

deal with the sin problem. The issue is the fact that I cannot save myself and therefore I need to have a Savior. I need to place my trust in Christ's substitutionary death on the cross. But according to Hodges, sin is not the issue and repentance is not required. The core issue, to Hodges, is not lack of a right standing before a holy God. Instead the core issue is that lost mankind needs eternal life.

Hodges goes on to explain:

In the final analysis, therefore, salvation is the result of believing in Jesus to provide it. Salvation is not the result of assenting to a detailed creed. Salvation does not even require an understanding of how it was provided for or made possible. All it requires is that the sinner understand the sufficiency of the name of Jesus to guarantee the eternal well-being of every believer.

Does that mean that we should not preach the message of the cross? Absolutely not! Hodges maintains that we should indeed preach the cross of Christ. He explains:

In the light of what we have just said, should we preach the cross of Christ? The answer to that is emphatically yes. And the most obvious reason for doing so is that this is what Paul and the other Apostles did.

Why should men trust Christ for eternal life? The gospel gives us the wonderful answer. They should do so because Jesus has bought their salvation at the cost of His own precious blood.

The preaching of the cross greatly facilitates the process of bringing men to faith in God's Son.

Why preach the cross? Because it helps to bring men to faith. According to Hodges, preaching the cross demonstrates that Christ is trustworthy. However, it is not faith in Christ's work on the cross that saves. It's only faith in the Christ who promised eternal life that saves.

In Hodge's view, preaching the cross is helpful, but it is not absolutely essential since a person can be saved without believing in Christ's substitutionary death.

When you buy a car, some equipment is optional like a sun roof. Some equipment comes standard like the engine. In my opinion, the minimalist view of the gospel treats the cross as optional equipment. It's helpful, but not absolutely necessary. In the traditional view of free grace theology, the cross is standard equipment. The package just won't work without the centrality of the cross as being the heart of the gospel message. The cross is the engine that gives power to the message. Or as Paul wrote, the gospel of Christ (which includes the message of the cross) is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes. Paul also wrote:

For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect. For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, And bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent." Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified... (1Cor. 1:17-23)

Hodges began with the idea that repentance is not necessary for salvation. If sin is not an issue, or barrier to being saved, then what is? It's the fact that mortal man does not possess eternal life. Zane simply followed his own reasoning to a so-called "logical end."

As you explore the differences between free grace theologians, many more contrasts begin to stand out. It's not simply an issue of whether or not repentance is a requirement for salvation.

Contrasts in Free Grace Theology

	<i>Charles Ryrie & Robert Lightner</i>	<i>Zane Hodges & GES</i>
<i>The problem</i>	Sinful man lacks a righteous standing before a holy God.	Mortal man lacks eternal life.
<i>The sin issue</i>	Sin is an issue for mankind. The lost sinner must trust in Christ's death on the cross in order to be saved. Therefore Christ's substitutionary death is the heart of the gospel message.	Sin is not an issue for mankind. Christ already took care of the sin issue for mankind by His death on the cross. Therefore Christ's substitutionary death is not an essential part of the gospel message.
<i>Repentance</i>	Repentance is a necessary requirement for salvation. The lost need to change their minds about: 1) Sin (they have offended a holy God); 2) Self (they cannot save themselves); and 3) the Savior (Christ died on their behalf to pay the penalty for their sin).	Repentance is not a necessary requirement for salvation.
<i>Repentance in John's Gospel</i>	Since John's Gospel uses the word "believe" and does not use the word "repent," the two concepts must be related. They are opposite sides of the same coin. To believe in Christ's substitutionary death, is to change your mind about your own sinfulness and your own ability to save yourself.	Since John's Gospel uses the word "believe" and does not use the word "repent," repentance is not necessary for salvation.
<i>The content of faith</i>	Since sin is the issue, the lost sinner must believe in Christ's substitutionary death in order to be saved.	Since lack of eternal life is the issue, mortal man must believe that Christ is the guarantor of eternal life.
<i>1 Cor. 15:3-4</i>	Represents the essential elements of the gospel for the lost.	Represents the gospel for the saved.

Free grace theology is not new. It's been around for a long time. An element of free grace theology seems to be moving away from the more traditional wing, as represented by men such as Dr. Ryrie and Dr. Lightner. Only time will tell whether this free grace fracture widens or eventually resolves itself. The lines are being drawn and voices on both sides of the issue are expressing their opinions. Where we go from here remains to be seen. If nothing else, this debate should serve to clarify the essential elements of the gospel message.