

## Salvation without Repentance from Sin? A Critique of the “Free Grace” Gospel

The “Free Grace” movement (especially as promoted by the late Zane Hodges) claims that we should not include a call to repentance from sin in our gospel presentations, and we should not tell people that genuine faith will always produce good works in a person’s life, because these things add “works” to the gospel. This session will explain how the Free Grace movement (1) misunderstands the classic Reformation principle of “justification by faith alone,” (2) weakens the gospel message as taught in the New Testament, (3) gives false assurance of salvation to many unconverted people, (4) adopts numerous highly unlikely interpretations of the New Testament, and (5) overemphasizes mental assent to propositions while underemphasizing heartfelt trust in the living person of Jesus Christ.

**Wayne Grudem** is Research Professor of Theology and Biblical Studies at Phoenix Seminary in Arizona. He is a graduate of Harvard (BA), Westminster Seminary-Philadelphia (MDiv, DD), and the University of Cambridge (PhD). He has served as the president of the Evangelical Theological Society (1999), as a member of the Translation Oversight Committee for the English Standard Version of the Bible, and was the General Editor for the *ESV Study Bible* (2008). He has written more than 20 books, including *Systematic Theology*, *The Gift of Prophecy in the New Testament and Today*, *Business for the Glory of God*, and (with Barry Asmus) *The Poverty of Nations: A Sustainable Solution*. He also co-edited (with John Piper) *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*. Over 300 of his articles and lectures are available at [www.WayneGrudem.com](http://www.WayneGrudem.com).

### Introduction:

A. This is a difference between friends.

B. What is the “Free Grace” gospel?

→ The “Free Grace” position claims that we are justified by faith alone, and that “alone” means “not necessarily accompanied by other human actions connected to salvation”  
Specifically, the Free Grace position claims that it is wrong to say:

- (1) that repentance from sin must accompany faith or
- (2) that good works and continuing to believe necessarily result from faith.

C. Why I do not use the term “Lordship Salvation”

### I. The Free Grace movement does not teach the Reformation doctrine of “justification by faith alone”

A. Different ways in which “alone” can be used

1. Reformation teaching was: **We are justified by faith alone** [it alone is what God requires] **but the faith that justifies is never alone** [repentance, good works always come with it]

2. Example of blue key “alone” opens my office door – but the blue key is “never alone”
- B. Protestant leaders throughout history have consistently disagreed with the Free Grace position
1. John Calvin (Reformed, 1509-1564)
  2. Formula of Concord (Lutheran, 1576)
  3. 39 Articles of the Church of England (Anglican, 1571)
  4. Westminster Confession of Faith (Reformed, 1646)
    - 4a. Philadelphia Baptist Confession (1688) – same wording as Westminster Confession on this topic
  5. New Hampshire Baptist Confession (1833)
  6. John Wesley (Methodist, 1703-1791).
- C. Therefore the Free Grace movement today is not upholding the Reformation doctrine of *sola fide*, or “justification by faith alone.”
- D. There is no logical difficulty in claiming this

A contradiction: We are justified by faith alone, and we are not justified by faith alone.

A contradiction: The faith that justifies is by itself and the faith that justifies is not by itself.

Not a contradiction: We are justified by faith alone, and the faith that justifies is not alone.

## **II. Free Grace theology weakens the gospel message by avoiding any call to unbelievers to repent of their sins**

- A. Repentance from sin is frequent in gospel summaries
- Hebrews 6:1; Luke 24:47; Acts 2:38; 3:19; 5:31; 11:18; 17:30-31; 20:21; 26:19-20; 2 Pet. 3:9; also Isa 6:5; 55:6-7
- B. Repentance from sin in narrative examples of Jesus dealing with individuals
- Luke 18:18-30; 19:1-10; John 4:16; etc.
- C. Two different Free Grace explanations for the “repentance” verses
1. “An internal resolve to turn from sin” -- but not necessary before saving faith (desirable afterward) David R. Anderson, Zane Hodges

2. “A change of mind” – necessary before saving faith (change one’s mind about self, sin, Christ) Charles Bing

D. Evidence from Greek lexicons and reference works:

1. BDAG definition (640): Puts every NT passage under meaning #2, “feel remorse, repent, be converted,”

2. TDNT definition

Free Grace author Charles Bing, *Lordship Salvation*, quotes Johannes Behm in TDNT: “For the Greeks *metanoēō* never suggests an alteration in the total moral attitude, a profound change in life’s direction, a conversion which affects the whole conduct . . . . One searches the Greek world in vain for the origin of the New Testament understanding of *metanoēō* and *metanoia*’ (4:980),” and then Bing adds his own comment, “As if the New Testament writers were from *another* world!” (Bing, *Lordship Salvation*, 68).

But Bing does not mention Behm’s discussion of extra-biblical Jewish literature:

“What **Philo** denotes by *metanoēō* or *metanoia* is the OT and Jewish concept of conversion, namely, radical turning to God . . . turning from sin . . . change of nature” (4:993). He says that **Josephus** likes to use these terms “for the concept of religious and moral conversion” (4:995).

In the **Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha**, “the predominant sense of *metanoēō* is now ‘to convert’ and of *metanoia* ‘conversion.’” (4:991).

And Bing does not mention Behm’s TDNT section on “***metanoēō* and *metanoia* in the New Testament**”: “The terms have religious and ethical significance along the lines of the OT and Jewish concept of conversion, for which there is no analogy in secular Greek . . . . *metanoēō* and *metanoia* are the forms in which the NT gives new expression to the ancient concept of religious and moral conversion” (TDNT 4:999-1000).

3. A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (1931)

4. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (1941)

E. All English translations use “Repent!” and not “Change your mind!”

F. However, saving faith does not include obedience

I think it results in obedience, but I do not think it includes obedience.

Nor does any major Protestant confession say that saving faith includes obedience.

(Statements to this effect by John Stott and John MacArthur are unfortunate, unwise, claim too much)

G. Conclusion: A weakened gospel message, but not a false gospel

Free Grace Alliance: “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.”

**III. Free Grace theology gives false assurance of eternal life to many people who profess faith in Christ but then show no evidence in their pattern of life.**

A. The result of the weakened Free Grace gospel is many unsaved people

B. New Testament epistles frequently warn churchgoers to be sure that they are saved  
James 2:14-17; 1 Cor. 6:9-11; 2 Cor. 13:5; Heb. 3:12; 1 John 2:3-5; 3:6, 9-10, 14

C. Free Grace teaching about assurance makes a fundamental category mistake

Q1: Has Christ earned salvation for all who trust in him?

Q2: Have I trusted in him?

D. The historic Protestant view does not say that assurance is impossible but just the opposite  
“Such as truly believe in the Lord Jesus, and love him in sincerity, endeavoring to walk in all good conscience before him, *may, in this life, be certainly assured that they are in the state of grace . . . .* This certainty is not a bare conjectural and probable persuasion . . . .  
But an infallible assurance of faith founded upon the *divine truth* of the promises of salvation, the *inward evidences* of those graces unto which these promises are made, the *testimony of the Spirit* of adoption witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God” (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, 18:1-2).

**IV. Free Grace advocates have to adopt numerous highly unlikely interpretations of the New Testament because of the need to defend their mistaken understanding of the word “alone” in the phrase “faith alone.”**

**Romans 10:9-13:** . . . if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. <sup>10</sup> For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. <sup>11</sup> For the Scripture says, “Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.” <sup>12</sup> For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. <sup>13</sup> For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

**John 15:6:** “If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.”

**Acts 11:18:** “When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, “Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.”

**Acts 17:30:** “The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to *repent*.”

**Acts 26:19-20:** “Therefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision,<sup>20</sup> but declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, *that they should repent and turn to God*, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance.”

**James 2:14-17:** What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has *faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?*<sup>15</sup> If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food,<sup>16</sup> and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that?<sup>17</sup> So also *faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead*.

**James 2:26:** “For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.” Compare also James 2:17: “So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.”

## V. Free Grace teaching overemphasizes agreement with facts and underemphasizes heartfelt trust in the person of Christ

- A. Some Free Grace advocates affirm clearly that faith equals intellectual assent  
“Faith in Christ is intellectual assent. Stripped of its pejorative connotation, ‘intellectual assent’ is a good definition of what faith is. For example, do you believe that George Washington was the first President of the United States? If you do, then you know what faith is from a biblical perspective. There is no commitment, no decision of the will, no turning from sins, and no works that are part of faith in Christ. If you are convinced or persuaded that what He promised is true, then you believe in Him” (Bob Wilkin, “What Is Free Grace Theology?” *Grace in Focus* 29:5 (September/October, 2014), 27.)
- B. Other Free Grace advocates say that faith includes trust in the person of Christ  
“What makes saving faith different from any other faith is its object. Therefore, saving faith is defined as *trust or confidence in the Lord Jesus Christ* as the savior from sin. It is personal acceptance of the work of the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross for the sinner” (Charles Bing, *Lordship Salvation*, 62; see also 175-176).
- C. Both groups deemphasize the element of heartfelt trust in the living person of Christ  
Not surprising:
  - (1) In personal encounter with the living God, people do not consider repentance from sin to be optional.
  - (2) Trusting in the person of Christ makes assurance more complex, not as simple to determine.

- D. Saving faith requires trust in the person of Christ, and this means that mental agreement with facts about Christ without personal trust in Christ is not saving faith
1. Saving faith is pictured as “coming to Christ”: John 6:37; also 6:35; 6:44; 7:37; Matt. 11:28-29
  2. Saving faith is pictured as “receiving” Christ: John 1:11-12; also Col. 2:6
  3. Saving faith is pictured as believing something in your heart: Rom. 10:9-10; also Acts 16:14; Ezek. 36:26
  4. Free Grace misunderstandings of B. B. Warfield on the need to decide to trust in Christ  
Note on Joseph Dillow’s inaccurate representation of B. B. Warfield, “On Faith and Its Psychological Aspects,” in *Studies in Theology*, Vol. 9 of *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield* (reprint Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991, p. 315).
  5. Saving faith is portrayed as “believing in” a person: John 3:16; 3:18; 6:35; 6:40; 11:25-26

## Conclusion