

Journal of the
GRACE EVANGELICAL SOCIETY
“Faith Alone in Christ Alone”

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Journal of the
GRACE EVANGELICAL SOCIETY
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Purpose: Grace Evangelical Society was formed “to promote the clear proclamation of God’s free salvation through faith alone in Christ alone, which is properly correlated with and distinguished from issues related to discipleship.”

We Affirm: God, out of love for the human race, sent the Lord Jesus Christ into the world to save sinners. He paid the full penalty for human sin when He died on the cross. Any person who believes in Jesus Christ for everlasting life receives that gift which, as the words *everlasting life* suggest, can never be lost (John 1:29; 3:16-18; 19:30; 1 Tim 1:16).

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A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

In May of 2023, Grace Evangelical Society held its annual national conference. The title of the event was, “Vital Free Grace Issues.” This theme was chosen because of certain theological divisions within the broader Free Grace movement. Each speaker addressed a specific area of doctrinal difference among those who call themselves proponents of Free Grace. These differences revolve around the gospel of eternal life. The New Testament uses the word *gospel* in different ways, but at this conference we emphasized the message that saves the unbeliever from the lake of fire: What must the unbeliever believe?

Sessions at the conference also attempted to address the call for inclusivity among those in the Free Grace community. Many who call themselves Free Grace say we should overlook our differences, even concerning the gospel. They maintain that there are different ways to present the gospel, that the unbeliever can be saved from the lake of fire by believing in various messages. All the speakers at the conference rejected this view, holding that there is only one message that saves: The unbeliever must believe in Jesus for eternal life.

The articles in this journal are the written presentations of six conference speakers. We encourage our readers to watch the oral presentations online at https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLY9IcmV16LTTs31iiOrR_7vT5cSPDRRC2.

At this link, the reader will also find other presentations, as well as break-out sessions that did not deal with the main theme.

In his article in this journal, Robert Wilkin argues that we should not reject the gospel of eternal life by faith in Christ alone simply in order to make our preaching more inclusive. A big tent philosophy of ministry is not Biblical. Mike Lii explains the difference between two major divisions within Free Grace circles, labeling them as “flexible” and “focused.” Bob Bryant provides some historical context to the debate, going back to the 2006 GES conference to show when some in the movement rejected the idea that eternal security is a necessary part of the gospel presentation. Ken Yates maintains that the offer of forgiveness of sins, which is often used as a gospel presentation, is not the same thing as the message of eternal life by faith alone.

David Janssen also discusses eternal security, highlighting that faith is completely separate from works. Faith without works is faith. The

unbeliever needs to believe in Jesus for eternal life, which means he or she is convinced that what the Lord promises is true. When speaking to unbelievers, that is what faith means. John Claeys addresses an issue that has come to light in recent times in certain Free Grace discussions. He concludes that unbelievers who die will not receive eternal life after death.

Many think such discussions are divisive, unloving, and ungracious. The speakers, however, try to show the importance of these issues. If only one gospel brings eternal salvation, it is unloving and ungracious *not* to proclaim it.

IS BELIEVING IN JESUS FOR THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS THE SAME THING AS BELIEVING IN HIM FOR EVERLASTING LIFE?¹

KENNETH YATES

Editor

I. INTRODUCTION

Bob (Wilkin) mentioned in the introduction that forgiveness of sins is a big issue. He also mentioned that not all the speakers agree on everything. That is certainly the case when it comes to the forgiveness of sins. This is true not only concerning what I am going to discuss.² In recent years, I have found, even when talking with Free Grace people, that we have not worked out the details of what we believe about this subject. We just assume certain things about the forgiveness of sins without realizing that we do not agree on all of these things.

The topic of forgiveness of sins is many-faceted. I will deal only with how it relates to the issue of evangelism. Is it sufficient to tell the unbeliever that he or she needs to believe in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins? Is that enough information for a person to be eternally saved? Is it the same as believing in Jesus for eternal life?

Many people say that if a person believes in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins, that is sufficient.³ You do not have to mention eternal life, and the unbeliever does not have to know he or she has eternal life as long as the person believes he or she has the forgiveness of sins.⁴

I am going to address this question: Is believing in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins a proper evangelistic message? Many would say “yes.”⁵ In fact, although this is an unscientific survey, I would say that

¹ This article is the transcript of Ken Yates’ oral presentation. Certain small changes were made, such as the tense of some verbs and aside comments made during the presentation. Footnotes were added later for support.

² The presentation is accessible at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OEaoEHeRohA&list=PLY9IcmV16LT7Ts31iiOrR_7vT5cSPDRRc2&index=2&t=747s.

³ Stanley D. Toussaint, “Acts,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, eds. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 381.

⁴ John B. Polhill, *Acts*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 116. Polhill states that the forgiveness of sins is one of the “normative ingredients” of spiritual conversion.

⁵ Kenneth O. Gangel, *Acts*, Holman New Testament Commentary (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), 30. Gangel discusses Acts 2:38 in this regard.

most people would probably say that if you preach the gospel and say that Jesus will wash your sins away, this is an acceptable Biblical gospel presentation.⁶ They may use different words, such as, “Jesus will forgive your sins,” and that is considered acceptable as well. We hear such phrases in gospel presentations all the time.⁷

This is not true only in the United States. When I travel to Spanish-speaking countries, I hear the same thing in sermons.⁸ It is very common to hear the speaker declare the need to receive the forgiveness of sins. It is very, very rare to hear about eternal life, or that you will live forever, or that you will be in the kingdom of God forever. It is much more common to hear about the need to believe in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins and to hear people say, when speaking of their conversion, that their sins have been forgiven.

II. APPEALING TO SCRIPTURE

Perhaps the passage most often used to support this evangelistic message is 1 Cor 15:1-4. Many speakers say this is where Paul most clearly presents the gospel to unbelievers.

You probably know these verses. Paul says this is “the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.”

And this is the gospel that Paul preached to them: “For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures.”

In this passage—in which Paul talks about the gospel that he preached—he talks about Christ dying for our sins. Do you notice that he does not mention eternal life? He makes no mention of living forever. Many will point out that in this passage, Paul says his gospel is that Christ died for our sins. He does not say anything in these verses about eternal life.⁹

⁶ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 447.

⁷ Edwin A. Blum, “John,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, eds. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 343.

⁸ www.casadeoracionmexico.com is a case in point. This Spanish-speaking church has satellite churches in many places around the world. Its videos involve many different speakers. By far, the most common way of presenting the gospel is the offer of the forgiveness of sins.

⁹ David K. Lowery, “1 Corinthians,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, eds. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 542.

According to this interpretation of the passage, somebody could believe that Christ died for their sins and thus have forgiveness of sins without believing in Him for the assurance of eternal life. This is considered an acceptable gospel—a saving message.

Many would even say this is the preferable way to present the gospel. Maybe that is why we hear it so often—not just in the United States, but in other countries as well. That is why we often hear that if a person believes that Christ died on the cross and rose from the dead, his or her sins are forgiven. We are told that such a person is a child of God even if that person does not believe he or she has eternal life and even if that one believes he or she has to work to have eternal life. As long as the person believes his or her sins are forgiven *now*, he or she has believed the saving gospel.

On a side note, let me just say that in 1 Corinthians 15, the gospel, or “good news,” that Paul is talking about is the physical resurrection of Christ. Paul is talking about rewards, about being saved at the Judgment Seat of Christ, and about being healthy at that judgment. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul is not talking about the evangelistic message that saves a person from the lake of fire.¹⁰ Paul is talking to believers, and some believers in the church at Corinth were saying that the physical body would not rise. That is the context of the whole chapter.¹¹ This strongly suggests that 1 Cor 15:1-4 is not a good place to go to find the message that saves a person from hell.

When people look at a passage like 1 Cor 15:1-4, it is no wonder that they are more likely to speak about the forgiveness of sins or the need for a person to have sins washed away than to speak about the need to believe in Jesus for eternal life.

This is what I have found in my survey of various gospel tracts, commentaries, and blogs. I would like to discuss four examples in which writers say you do not need to believe in Jesus for eternal life to be eternally saved. They say that the unbeliever need not even be aware of that concept, as long as he or she understands that his or her sins are forgiven.

¹⁰ Dwight L. Hunt, “The First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians,” in *The Grace New Testament Commentary*, ed. Robert N. Wilkin (Denton, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2010), 757.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 762.

III. EVANGELISTIC TRACTS

One gospel tract I recently read presented the gospel in a way that calls for a sinner's prayer: "Dear God, I am a sinner, and I need forgiveness. I believe that Jesus Christ shed His precious blood and died for my sins. I am willing to turn from sin. I now invite Christ to come into my heart."¹²

Notice that works are involved here. The unbeliever must be willing to turn from his or her sin. Evidently, a sinner's prayer is required as well, and there is a need to invite Christ into your heart. This is considered an acceptable gospel presentation.

Do you notice that the tract includes nothing about assurance of salvation? It does not mention eternal life. That is a common characteristic in these tracts.

Another tract concentrates on the cross of Christ. It says that in the cross of Jesus, God has already dealt with our sinful past. He freely offers us the forgiveness of sins.¹³

I am not sure, but I think the writer is implying that though you had a sinful past, Christ will clean up your life after you believe in Him.

Another tract says that all of us are sinners. God in His great mercy sent His only Son to save us from our sins. As the gospel says, His name is *Jesus* because He is the One who is able to save His people from their sins (Matt 1:21).¹⁴

This reference to Matt 1:21 is interesting. I wonder if the words here are not directed to the nation of Israel. To be honest, I do not wonder: I know that they are!

As the Christ, Jesus has the power to forgive sins. He says this to the Pharisees. As the Son of Man, He has the authority to forgive sins. In Mark 2, He tells the paralyzed man who was lowered through the roof that his sins are forgiven. (Just in passing, in the case of the paralyzed man, the issue is fellowship, not salvation from hell.)

Another tract says, "We need to be forgiven by God in order to be saved. Jesus' blood is the only way for this to happen." Again, we see that works are involved. "We must humble ourselves and forgive others

¹² New Life Baptist Church, "God's Plan of Salvation," <https://www.newlifegreencastle.com/know-jesus>. Accessed Feb 8, 2024.

¹³ Moments with the Book, "How to Be Saved," <https://mwtb.org/collections/whats-hot-this-month/products/how-to-be-saved?variant=2201051329>. Accessed Feb 8, 2024.

¹⁴ Moments with the Book, "Call His Name Jesus," <https://mwtb.org/products/call-his-name-jesus?variant=12848859938919>. Accessed Feb 8, 2024.

in order to receive forgiveness.”¹⁵ You can guess where that idea came from: The Scriptures say that if you do not forgive others, neither will you be forgiven (Matt 6:14-15).

But if you have to be forgiven of your sins to make it into the kingdom of God, and if you cannot be forgiven unless you forgive others, then you will not be a part of the kingdom if you do not forgive others. It is easy to see that in this tract, works are necessary to make it into the kingdom. The specific work is that you must forgive others.

Most, if not all, of these gospel presentations that deal with the forgiveness of sins include the idea that you need to recognize you are a sinner. As the person presenting the gospel, I need to get you to understand that you are a sinner and that you need to be saved from your sins. You need to be forgiven of your sins. This message is a way to introduce something else a person needs to do in order to be saved, such as feeling sorry for and repenting of his or her sins.

Therefore, we must address what *repentance of sins* means. It is common to understand this as “turning from” your sins. When you hear gospel presentations, I encourage you to listen for these ideas and try to figure out what is being said.

It is important to note that evangelicals in general are not the only ones who believe that the proclamation of the forgiveness of sins is an acceptable gospel presentation. Even people in what some would call the wider Free Grace circles believe this. They teach that the unbeliever can receive eternal life by believing one or more of several different things.

For example, if the unbeliever is told to believe that he or she is redeemed, that he or she has been reconciled, or that he or she has the forgiveness of sins, these are all acceptable gospel presentations.

Even teachers who are more broadly Free Grace will say that we do not have to tell the unbeliever about eternal life. The unbeliever does not need to believe in eternal life as long as he or she believes in one of these other things, such as the forgiveness of sins.

I had a conversation with one such individual, who said that the unbeliever is saved as long as he believes he has received “something” from Jesus.

¹⁵ Gospel Tract and Bible Society, “Forgiveness,” [https://www.gospeltractandbible.org/tract/forgiveness#:~:text=As%20we%20humble%20ourselves%20and,\(John%208%3A32\)](https://www.gospeltractandbible.org/tract/forgiveness#:~:text=As%20we%20humble%20ourselves%20and,(John%208%3A32).). Accessed Feb 8, 2024.

So, if I believe that Jesus forgives me of my sins, I believe that I am receiving something from Him. Even if works are involved to some degree—even if the unbeliever thinks, for example, that he or she must turn from sins in order to receive that forgiveness—then he or she is okay. To many, this would be an acceptable gospel presentation. The unbeliever who believes in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins—even if the person does not believe he or she has eternal life in Him—has that life because the person has believed in Him for forgiveness.

What are the problems with such an understanding of the saving message? There are many, but I will suggest only four.

IV. FOUR PROBLEMS

I would like to address four problems with the view that the forgiveness of sins is an acceptable option as a gospel presentation: 1) The forgiveness of sins and receiving eternal life are not the same thing; 2) The Gospel of John disagrees with this kind of gospel presentation; 3) It involves some practical issues; 4) It presents the unbeliever with a confusing message.

A. Forgiveness of Sins and Eternal Life Are Not the Same Thing

When we turn to Acts 2:38, we see that there is a difference between the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. There is a great deal of information about Acts 2:38 on GES's website, so it is a verse many of you probably know very well.

In Acts 2:38, Peter tells the listeners that they need to repent and that each of them is to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins. They will then receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Peter is offering them the forgiveness of sins if they will repent and be baptized.

As many readers probably realize, these people already had eternal life. In verse 37, we read that they had believed what Peter was preaching. They were already eternally saved; they already had eternal life.¹⁶ Now, Peter says that he is offering them the forgiveness of sins. It is clear that the forgiveness of sins and eternal life are not the same thing. They can receive forgiveness *after* they have eternal life.

¹⁶ Alberto S. Valdés, "The Acts of the Apostles," in *The Grace New Testament Commentary*, ed. Robert N. Wilkin (Denton, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2010), 493.

In Acts 22:16, Paul describes how he became a believer and what happened to him. If I were to ask you when Paul received eternal life, I guess that all, or most, of you would say it happened on the road to Damascus. That would be correct. He received eternal life on that road.¹⁷ A few days later, Ananias came to Paul and asked why he was waiting. Ananias told him to arise and be baptized in order to wash away his sins, calling upon the name of the Lord.

Once again, we see that the washing away of sins—the forgiveness of sins—is not the same thing as receiving eternal life or being born from above. At least some people in Acts receive forgiveness of sins after they have eternal life.

A great deal of material from Free Grace writers points out that the first generation of Jews in the book of Acts, just like we do today, received eternal life at the point of faith. But before these Jews received the forgiveness of sins, God required something else from them.¹⁸ It is important to understand that forgiveness and eternal life are not the same thing.

In the case of believers today, we can look at 1 John 1:9, where John says that if we confess our sins God is faithful and just to forgive us of our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. John is talking to believers, and believers receive the forgiveness of sins when they confess their sins. The believers addressed in 1 John already have eternal life but, in some sense, need to be forgiven when they sin. Eternal life and forgiveness of sin are two separate issues.

The NT is full of this teaching. So, what is the difference between eternal life and the forgiveness of sins? I do not want to state the obvious, but eternal life is eternal life. Believers receive eternal life the very moment they believe in Jesus for it. It is theirs. It is something that cannot be lost. By definition, it is eternal—and if it is eternal, it cannot end. That is what eternal life is.

The forgiveness of sins is different. It allows the believer to have fellowship, or intimacy, with the Lord. That fellowship can be lost. This is why 1 John 1:9 says that we need to confess our sins in order to receive the forgiveness of sins. The Word of God reveals our sins to us,

¹⁷ Stanley D. Toussaint, "Acts," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, eds. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 418.

¹⁸ Zane C. Hodges, *A Free Grace Primer* (Denton, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2011), 299-300.

and we are called to confess those sins in order to receive forgiveness.¹⁹ Our fellowship with the Lord, as believers, is then restored.

So, eternal life is something that the believer has forever at the moment of faith, and that can never be lost. At the initial moment of faith, we receive forgiveness of sins that allows us to have fellowship with Christ. The forgiveness of sins in 1 John 1:9 is something believers need to experience continually in order to remain in fellowship with the Lord.

A believer—who, by definition, has eternal life—can need to be forgiven. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives us a prayer in which we ask the Lord to forgive us as we forgive others. As a believer, I never need to receive eternal life again. That is not the case with forgiveness of sins. The believer needs to ask for forgiveness on occasion.

Today, when a person believes in Jesus Christ for eternal life, he also receives the forgiveness of sins. But forgiveness of sins is also something we need over and over. Eternal life and forgiveness of sins—which relates to fellowship with the Lord—are separate things. Eternal life cannot be lost. Fellowship can be lost, and forgiveness of sins is necessary for it to be restored.

B. The Gospel of John

The Gospel of John presents another problem with the position that offering forgiveness of sins is an acceptable gospel presentation. As many readers know, the Gospel of John is the only book written to unbelievers. It is the only book with the purpose of telling people how to be saved from the lake of fire.

In the Gospel of John, the forgiveness of sins is never used in presenting the gospel. The forgiveness of sins is never mentioned when an unbeliever is told how to be saved from the lake of fire. That tells me a lot right there. If the one book in the NT that tells us how to be spiritually saved does not use the phrase *forgiveness of sins*, why should I?

The forgiveness of sins is mentioned only once in the Gospel of John—John 20:23. There, Jesus is talking to the disciples. He says that if they forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them. If they retain the sins of any, they are retained.

¹⁹ Zane C. Hodges, *The Epistles of John: Walking in the Light of God's Love* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1999), 64-65.

Here, the forgiveness of sins means forgiveness within the church.²⁰ It deals with forgiveness among believers. This makes sense if we see the forgiveness of sins as a fellowship issue, rather than as something that is believed in order to receive eternal life.

In summary, the Gospel of John does not tell the unbelievers that they need to believe that their sins are forgiven. This is true of every one of the Lord's gospel presentations in the Gospel of John. When the Lord speaks to Nicodemus and the woman at the well, when He speaks to unbelievers in John 5 and John 6, and when He tells Martha in John 11 what a person needs to believe in order to be saved, He does not tell them to believe in Him for the forgiveness of sins.

In the Gospel of John, the reason for this is clear. John understands that what the unbeliever needs to believe in Jesus for is eternal life.

I find it strange to hear gospel presentations like those in the tracts mentioned previously. Some say that believing in Christ for the forgiveness of sins and believing in Him for eternal life is the same thing. They say that if you believe in Him for the forgiveness of sins, then having eternal life is automatic.

Here is a challenge for all of you: When you hear such a gospel presentation, listen for how many times you hear about believing in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins and how many times you hear about believing in Him for eternal life. The truth is that in that brand of gospel presentation, eternal life is practically never mentioned. They do not even use similar concepts, such as that if you believe in Him you will live with Him forever in His kingdom or that you will be with Him forever.

In other words, these gospel presentations do not follow Jesus' example in the Gospel of John. In John, Jesus does not mention the forgiveness of sins, but these presentations emphasize it. In John, Jesus repeatedly offers the unbeliever eternal life. These presentations do not mention it. When we present the gospel by telling the unbeliever to believe in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins, there should be a loud warning siren.

C. Practical Concerns

My third problem with presenting the gospel by telling the unbeliever to believe in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins is a practical one.

²⁰ Robert N. Wilkin, "The Gospel According to John," in *The Grace New Testament Commentary*, ed. Robert N. Wilkin (Denton, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2010), 475.

I understand that practical issues do not determine our doctrine. But there are some practical concerns in saying that believing in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins saves somebody from the lake of fire.

First, if that is a message that saves, we do not need to evangelize anybody, because many millions of people in the United States already believe that is the gospel. I would also say that in other countries we already have an exceedingly large number of evangelists preaching the forgiveness of sins.

I was a military chaplain. One of my bosses was a Christian Scientist. I had a problem with him because we were slated to preach together in a military chapel. He was my boss, and my career was in his hands, but I did not want to preach with him.

I decided I would not preach with him because he was a Christian Scientist. I had done a little reading and discovered that they believed some really weird things. So, I told him that I did not want to preach in a pulpit with him. That would have involved doing things like making the announcements when he preached and passing out the elements of the Lord's Supper when we had communion. I went to his office and told him of my decision.

He asked me why I would not share a pulpit with him, and I told him that he and I did not believe in the same things. He responded that he believed the same things I did. He said that he was a Christian, just as I was. I asked him what he believed. He informed me that he believed in Jesus for the forgiveness of his sins. He said that he believed Jesus had died on the cross for his sins and, as a result, his sins were forgiven in Christ.

That was not the only time I ran into such a situation. A friend I worked with was a Mormon chaplain. We had a conversation over lunch one day. In the military, Mormons are considered Protestant chaplains, and I asked my friend if he felt strange preaching at a Protestant chapel. I pointed out that his beliefs were heretical to most of the people in the chapel.

His response was interesting. He claimed that he was not heretical at all. I asked him what he meant, and he read 1 Cor 15:1-4 to me. He said that he believed every single word of those verses. He said that he was not a heretic because Paul gives the gospel by which we are saved and that he believed the same thing that I, and the other Protestant chaplains, did. He specifically said that he believed that Jesus died on

the cross and rose from the dead and that he had the forgiveness of sins in Christ.

If believing in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins is sufficient in order to be saved, then what the Christian Scientist and Mormon chaplains told me meant that they were spiritually saved. In the same way, the Catholic Church believes that its members have the forgiveness of sins through Christ. I worked with many Catholic chaplains through the years, and they all told me that they had forgiveness of sins through Christ.

A few years ago, I attended a Bible conference at which the people identified themselves as Free Grace believers. The leader of one session discussed the gospel the Catholic Church preaches and whether it is a saving message. He said that he had worked with Catholics for forty years and did not believe the Catholic gospel was a saving one. However, most of the people in that room said it was. It was pointed out that the Catholic Church proclaims that its members have the forgiveness of sins through Christ.

I once taught at a Bible college in Ukraine. I found it strange that, though it was a Baptist Bible college, none of the students believed in eternal security, likely because of their Mennonite background. The students were very upfront about the fact that a Christian could not have assurance of eternal life. They strongly believed that they could lose their eternal salvation. I asked the class what message they preached when they evangelized. They said that they preach the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ and specifically appealed to 1 Cor 15:1-4.

My point here is that if the forgiveness of sins is an acceptable gospel presentation, then pretty much everybody is preaching a sufficient message. Our work is practically done. That message is being preached everywhere, even in Christian cults. Free Grace people have little or nothing to add when it comes to evangelism.

My daughter Kathryn and I go to Zambia and Kenya every year to teach. In those countries, I have spoken in various churches. In those churches, as a general rule, preachers say you can lose your salvation for almost any reason. At the same time, they claim that their sins have been forgiven in Christ. You hear such a message all the time.

D. It Is Confusing

The fourth problem I have with saying that the forgiveness of sins is an acceptable saving message is that it is very confusing. We

get a hint of this confusion when we remember the gospel tracts I mentioned earlier. In them, the forgiveness of sins is often predicated upon things such as humbling yourself and/or forgiving others. The unbeliever needs to do those things in order to receive the forgiveness of sins. But what do these things mean? What does it mean to humble yourself? What does it mean to forgive others? Those tracts made such steps necessary for receiving the forgiveness of sins.

At a more basic level, what does *the forgiveness of sins* itself mean? What did my Mormon chaplain friend and Christian Scientist boss mean when they said they had the forgiveness of sins in Christ? Such a statement can mean many different things, and the unbeliever does not have a clue what a particular evangelist means.

I can give you my experience regarding what various people mean when they evangelize by offering the forgiveness of sins. The Catholic Church preaches it, as do the Mormons and Christian Scientists. Arminians, such as the students in Ukraine who believed you can lose your salvation, do as well.

What they all have in common is that *the forgiveness of sins* means the new “believer” starts with a clean state. He is on a kind of probation. When you believe you have the forgiveness of sins you have a conditional kind of salvation.

Do you remember the movie *Animal House*? The dean of the college in the movie tells the stars of the show that they are on “double secret probation” because of their antics. It is kind of like that with many people who preach the forgiveness of sins. The new believer often thinks that if he now lives a holy life, he might make it into the kingdom of God.

When I was in the Army, I wanted to go to a school called Jump Master School. I wanted to go because I was a young man with a lot of testosterone. The jump master is the soldier who leads everybody in jumping out of an airplane and parachuting to the ground. I thought it would be very exciting to be that guy. It was a challenge placed before me.

The problem was that the school was difficult. You had to meet certain standards in order to graduate. We could not bend these standards. Each student could be tested up to four times. He had to pass the test. He had to inspect three jumpers who were wearing all their equipment. Each mock jumper had mistakes purposely built into his parachute

and uniform. The student had to follow a certain pattern of inspection and find the errors. He had to do so in five minutes.

Approximately eighty-five percent of students failed on their first attempt. I was among them. After I failed, the sergeant who was teaching the course took me aside and told me to “shake it off.” He told me I was forgiven for not catching the errors.

Clearly, he did not mean that I was now a jumpmaster. He meant that I should forget that I had failed the exam. I should look at it as having a clean slate. I had three more attempts to get it right, but I still had to meet the standards on one of those exams.

I am convinced that this is the way most unbelievers understand it when they hear that they will receive the forgiveness of sin if they believe in Jesus. They have a clean slate. If they don’t smoke, drink, or go to bars anymore, they have a chance to make it into heaven. Hopefully, Peter will tell them that they are good to go when they get to the pearly gates. The unbeliever will be very confused about what it means that his sins are forgiven. The vast majority will believe they are on some kind of probation. They do not believe that they have eternal life that cannot be lost.

Imagine the confusion such people will experience if they hear 1 John 1:9. Let’s say they believe that their sins are forgiven and that they are now on probation. They just need to do certain things, which means they need to live a good life. Then they read a verse like 1 John 1:9, which says that if we confess our sins, the Lord is just to forgive us of our sins. These people will think they must keep confessing their sins in order to make it into the kingdom.

Others will think they need to do other things to make it through their probationary period. In Kenya, for example, preachers preach that Jesus gives people forgiveness of sins. Now that they have that forgiveness, they need to beware of demons. They may need to have a demon cast out of them in order to finally make it into heaven. Others will think they need to endure in good works until the end of their lives. Some, such as Roman Catholics, believe that they must keep the sacraments of the church.

Such an understanding does not equate the forgiveness of sins with the reception of eternal life. People can believe they have the forgiveness of sins and, if they are fortunate, can get eternal life later. They do not believe they have eternal life now.

We also see the confusing nature of offering the gospel as the forgiveness of sins in the various ways it is presented. Some say the unbeliever needs to believe in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins and get baptized. Others use 1 Cor 15:1-4 and say the unbeliever must believe in the forgiveness of sins and then hold fast. That was the position of my students in Ukraine.

Once I was listening to a sermon on a podcast. The preacher started by saying that the listener needs to believe in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins. If he or she did, the person would be saved. Surprisingly, the preacher then added that if someone did that, the person could not lose his or her salvation. When I heard that I silently said, "Hallelujah." I was surprised, though, because I knew that the preacher was Arminian and believed a Christian could lose his or her salvation.

I wondered what he meant. I was confused. I wished he had stopped right there. He was basically saying that the listener who believed in Jesus would be saved forever and could never lose that salvation. But the speaker did not stop there.

The preacher said something good. I wished he had stopped when he said that if the listener believed in Jesus, he or she would receive a forever salvation that could never be lost. But then the preacher said something terrible. After saying that faith would bring the forgiveness of sins and a salvation that could not be lost, he said that if you believe that, you must be careful. If you keep sinning, your sins will harden your heart. A hardened heart can lead you into serious sin. You cannot lose your salvation, but if you have a hard heart, you can give it back to God and wind up in hell.

I must admit that I was very confused by this message. I didn't know what he meant. He preached the forgiveness of sins, but clearly this was not a permanent thing. He was proclaiming a gospel of good works. Obviously, the forgiveness of sins and eternal life were not the same thing to this preacher. Many believe that their sins are forgiven, but they do not believe they have eternal life. Anybody listening to that sermon would conclude that. They would believe, perhaps, that they temporarily had eternal life. The preacher was saying that the listener who had believed had been forgiven, and now he needed to get to work.

V. CONCLUSION

When we hear gospel presentations that offer the forgiveness of sins if the unbeliever believes in Jesus for such forgiveness, there is a great deal of confusion. It is an extremely popular way to present the gospel, and different preachers and evangelists mean different things by those terms.

To show the popularity of this gospel, we only need to look at the largest Evangelical denomination in the United States. The Southern Baptist statement of faith has a heavy emphasis on sin and the need for forgiveness when it explains the gospel. It refers to the unbeliever as a “sinner” who needs the “conviction of sin.” He needs a “genuine turning from sin” and a “full acquittal.” This will bring the new believer into a relationship of “favor with God.” There is no mention of the offer of eternal life.²¹

While some Baptists might believe this message includes the offer of eternal life that cannot be lost, even if it is not mentioned, most proclaimers of this gospel do not. We see this in the examples of the Mormons, Christian Scientists, Catholics, and Arminian evangelists. We can rest assured that the unbeliever will be confused about what it all means, often believing that with the forgiveness of sins he or she has a clean slate and now has a fighting chance to make it into the kingdom if he or she lives correctly from now on. He or she is forgiven, in a probational way.

Instead, we should present the gospel the same way it is presented in the Gospel of John. We are to tell the unbelievers that Jesus offers them eternal life that can never be lost if they believe in Him for it.

In presenting that message, we should say that Christ died for our sins to take away the barrier of sins. Because of that death, and the payment for our sins, Christ can, and does, give eternal life to all who believe in Him for it.

It is possible, of course, that unbelievers can believe in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins and conclude that they will live with the Lord in His kingdom forever and have assurance of that fact. That would be a rarity. Even in this situation, however, the unbeliever is saved because

²¹ <https://www.sbps.edu>. This is the website for Southern Seminary, the flagship educational institution of the Southern Baptist denomination. It directs the visitor to “The Baptist Faith and Message.”

he or she believes he or she has eternal life in Christ, not because he or she believes his or her sins are forgiven.²²

A person who believes that he or she is forgiven but must work to make it into heaven does not understand the message of eternal life. If that is all the person has ever believed, he or she does not have eternal life. There is a difference between the forgiveness of sins and receiving eternal life

When we speak to unbelievers, let's remove any confusion. Let's make it crystal clear. Jesus will give you eternal life if you believe in Him for it. At the moment of faith, you know you have it and it can never be lost. That is what the word "eternal" means. That is what the Gospel of John says. We should say the same.

²² Wilkin, "John," 476.

FAITH WITHOUT WORKS IS STILL FAITH

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I. INTRODUCTION

“*If someone really believes in Jesus for everlasting life, their life will show it through their good works.*”
“*Good works prove someone is saved.*”

You have likely heard or made statements similar to these. Don't these explanations sound reasonable? Someone who believes in Jesus *should* show his or her “new life” (2 Cor 5:17). People generally look at others who believe in Jesus to see if they act “like a Christian.” To the point, *The Babylon Bee* reports: “Local believer shows no evidence of salvation before morning coffee.”¹

But we must ask: “Is it true? What does the Bible teach?”

I want to make the case that good works do *not* prove whether or not someone has eternal life, because “Faith without works is still faith.” A person receives the gift of eternal life by believing in Jesus for eternal life independent of any good works he or she does. Although there are many issues regarding the relationship between faith and work, we must start with the foundation that “Faith without works is still faith.” I will first address two flawed approaches to requiring works in order to receive eternal life.

II. FLAWED APPROACH ONE: *ADDING WORKS TO FAITH*

This approach could be described as “belief in Jesus and something else.” This perspective views “belief in Jesus” as insufficient. Justification salvation² requires belief *and* works. *Works* are defined by whatever church or religious group is making the statement. Works could include

¹ “Local Believer Shows No Evidence Of Salvation Before Morning Coffee,” *BabylonBee.com*, Feb 16, 2017, <https://babylonbee.com/news/local-believer-shows-no-evidence-salvation-morning-coffee>.

² By “justification salvation” I mean the justification that happens at the point of initial faith. When a person believes in Jesus for eternal life, he or she is also declared righteous before God. That is justification.

water baptism, making Jesus Lord of your life, other religious rituals, or confessing all your sins.

Although it is common for Catholics and Mormons to require works, I find it increasingly common for people in Evangelical churches to add the requirement of works as well.

A. Illustration One: Mormonism Adds Works as a Requirement

Let me illustrate how Mormonism adds works to faith, since my ministry is in Utah and I regularly converse with Mormons. When I ask Mormon missionaries what a person must do to be saved, they will typically answer “A person is saved by faith in Jesus Christ our Savior.” When I ask them about the requirement of good works, they will say something like, “If a person really believes in Jesus Christ, then it will show up in their good works.”

Sound familiar? They say exactly the same thing that Reformed and Lordship Salvation people say.

When you interact with Mormons, you need to understand that they use Biblical or theological words differently from the way Evangelicals use them. This means that you need to ask them what they mean by what they say. You must do this repeatedly.

Even though they say, “Salvation is by believing in Jesus Christ our Savior,” and that “people are saved by grace,” the LDS Church teaches that these phrases mean something different from our understanding of them. It is worth asking Mormons to explain 2 Nephi 25:23 in the Book of Mormon, which says, “We know that it is by grace, that we are saved, after all we can do.”

Did you catch the phrase “*after* all we can do”? LDS grace does not kick in until you have done “all you can do.” I ask them, “Have you done ‘all you can do’?” No Mormon has told me he or she has met that requirement. This is rightly called “the impossible gospel.”

If you do some more digging, you will find that the Mormon Church is very clear on what it thinks about “belief in Jesus Christ alone” for salvation. The twelfth president of the LDS Church was Spencer W. Kimball.³ In *The Miracle of Forgiveness*, Kimball says, “One of the most fallacious doctrines originated by Satan and propounded

³ The current president of the LDS Church is Russell M. Monson. He is the seventeenth president, or living prophet, and is ninety-nine years old. So, the “prophet” of the LDS church could change before this article is published.

by man is that man is saved alone by the grace of God; that belief in Jesus Christ alone is all that is needed for salvation.”⁴

Not only do they agree that belief in Jesus for salvation is wrong, but they also view such a belief as coming straight from Satan.

So, despite what the Mormon missionaries say, their church completely rejects a Free Grace view of the sufficiency of belief in Jesus for eternal life. Hence, LDS people commonly tell me, “I cannot accept that just believing in Jesus is enough. You have to do good works.”

You may be asking, “Why this material about Mormonism?” Even though Mormonism clearly teaches the requirement of works for eternal life, it is not forthcoming in presenting that belief to people.

Mormons sound as if they are teaching “faith alone in Christ alone,” but they are not. The same thing sometimes happens in Evangelical churches. They may sound as if their message is a clear Free Grace message that does not add works; however, when you ask more questions, you find out that works are required. In my experience, it is not uncommon for people, even some in Free Grace churches, to think that good works are necessary for eternal salvation.

B. Illustration Two: John MacArthur Says Works Are Proof of Saving Faith

This view sees good works as proof, or the concrete evidence, of saving faith. I appreciate John MacArthur being clear on this point. Consider the following short quotes (emphasis added):

Faith is by nature turned and toned toward obedience (Acts 5:32; Rom 1:5, 2:8, 16:26), so good works are *inevitable* in the life of one who truly believes. These works have no part in bringing about salvation (Eph 2:9; Rom 3:20, 24; 4:5; Titus 3:5), but they *show that salvation is indeed present* (Eph. 2:10; 5:9; 1 John 2:5).⁵

Again, we must be clear: Obedience does not produce or maintain salvation, but it is the *inevitable* characteristic of those who are saved.⁶

The apostle Paul in particular was a champion of the great doctrine of justification by faith. Yet he

⁴ Spencer Kimball, *The Miracle of Forgiveness* (Salt Lake City, UT: Bookcraft, 1969), 206.

⁵ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Faith Works: The Gospel According to the Apostles* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1993), 142.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 121.

recognized the lordship of Christ (Rom 10:9-10) and the place of works in a believer's life (Eph 2:10). For him, faith was not a dormant quality that might fail to produce righteous fruit. He saw practical righteousness as the *necessary* and *inevitable* result of true faith.⁷

The *inevitable* result of genuine salvation is good works.⁸

The above quotes indicate that MacArthur likes the word *inevitable*. *Inevitable* points to good works as certain to happen. They are unavoidable for a true believer. The word *inevitable* allows some leeway for *when* good works will show up, but no question as to *whether* they *will* show up. Although MacArthur does not use the word *automatic*, in a sense, he teaches that the outcome of good works will be automatic. They will certainly happen at some point. This idea of good works being inevitable, certain, automatic, or guaranteed to happen at some point is simply not found in the NT.

In fact, the opposite is found. Since good works are not inevitable, certain, automatic, or guaranteed, God commands to believers as to what they *should* do. The believer ends up choosing to obey or not to obey. If good works were inevitable, no commands would be necessary.

In the NT letters, written to believers during this dispensation, there are 568 Greek imperatives or commands. Most of these are transferable and applicable to believers today. "Faith without works is still faith" because a believer in Jesus can choose not to obey the NT commands, and, hence, can be "without works."

C. Does the Message of Life⁹ in the Bible Add Works?

In wrestling with the relationship between good works and faith, it is important to be clear about what is meant by *faith*. *Faith* means to believe something—but to believe what? The answer is: the message of life. The content of the message of life is found primarily in the Gospel

⁷ John F. MacArthur Jr., *The Gospel According to Jesus: What Does Jesus Mean When He says "Follow Me"?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 248.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 168.

⁹ I am grateful to John Niemelä and Dix Winston for helping me see the value of sharing the "message of life" over sharing "the gospel" since "gospel" is used in a variety of ways, but infrequently to refer to the requirement for eternal life. See Bob Wilkin's excellent article, "What is the New Testament Gospel?" *JOTGES* 26 (2023): 33-45.

of John, but also in other NT places. I find Paul's comments in 1 Tim 1:15-16 to be informative and helpful.

It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost. Yet for this reason I found mercy, so that in me as the foremost *sinner* Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience as an example for *those who would believe in Him for eternal life* (NAS20, emphasis added).

Paul is writing to Timothy, who is in Ephesus, where Paul had spent about three years¹⁰ on his third missionary journey (Acts 18–21). He first addresses “strange doctrines” (1:3) and whatever is “contrary to sound teaching” (1:10). He then thanks Jesus for “putting [Paul] into service” (1:12) even though he is a sinner (1:13) and considers himself the foremost sinner (1:15). In 1:16, he points to himself as an example of Jesus Christ showing mercy and patience to him, a sinner, thus giving hope for others to believe and find the same mercy.

Then Paul exhorts Timothy to “fight the good fight” (1:18) and to “keep faith and a good conscience” (1:19).

In 1:16, Paul uses a very informative phrase: “For those who would believe in Him for eternal life.”

This is the most concise statement in Paul's writing of the requirement for receiving eternal life. It has three parts: 1) *believe* (not behave); 2) *in Him* (in the only One who promises eternal life); and 3) *for eternal life* (not for other things, such as physical healing, getting a job, or winning the lottery). As Robert Vacendak states: “When people believe in Christ, they are believing in Him for a specific reason—in order to live eternally.”¹¹

When presenting the message of life, the irreducible requirement is: “Believe in Jesus for eternal life.” None of the elements is optional.

Paul makes no mention of works as being required. This is not an argument *from* silence, but an argument *about* silence. In both 1 and 2 Timothy, Paul talks about the importance of good works several times, but never as a requirement for eternal life, nor as an *integral* part of

¹⁰ Charles Ryrie, *Ryrie Study Bible* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1995), 1875.

¹¹ Robert Vacendak, “Is Assurance of Salvation of the Essence of Saving Faith in the Gospel of John?” PhD diss., Liberty University, 2023, 194.

faith, nor as an *inevitable* result of believing. Note Paul's comments on works in just these four verses (emphasis added):¹²

. . . having a reputation for *good works*; *and* if she has brought up children, if she has shown hospitality to strangers, if she has washed the saints' feet, if she has assisted those in distress, *and* if she has devoted herself to every *good work*. (1 Tim 5:10)

Instruct them to do good, to be rich in *good works*, to be generous and ready to share... (1 Tim 6:18)

Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from these *things*, he will be an implement for honor, sanctified, useful to the Master, prepared for every *good work*. (2 Tim 2:21)

. . . so that the man [*or woman*] of God may be fully capable, equipped for every *good work*. (2 Tim 3:17)

Clearly, Paul does not hesitate to talk about and encourage good works in his letters to Timothy. But in 1 Tim 1:16, Paul does not even mention good works. The most concise way to state the message of life is: "Believe in Jesus for eternal life." Isn't that refreshing? It is not complicated or confusing.

III. FLAWED APPROACH TWO: *INTEGRATING WORKS INTO FAITH*

A. Illustration: Thomas Schreiner Integrates Works into Faith

Thomas Schreiner is a professor of NT at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. He has written many books, including *Faith Alone: The Doctrine of Justification*. Chapter 16 of this book is titled, "The Role of Good Works in Justification."

On page 191 he writes: "The New Testament clearly teaches that bare faith cannot save, and that works are necessary for final justification or final salvation."¹³

In context, this sentence is a good summary of what he presents in chapter 16. "Works are necessary" seems like an odd statement to

¹² See also 1 Tim 2:10; 5:17; 2 Tim 1:9; 2:15; 4:5.

¹³ Thomas Schreiner, *Faith Alone: The Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 191.

find in a book about faith alone because of its apparent conflict with the title.

Here are a few observations about Schreiner's sentence:

- a. "The New Testament clearly teaches" may be clear to him, but not to numerous other people, including myself. His perspective requires a Reformed or Lordship Salvation interpretation of certain passages to support his view. He finds support for his views in the passage of the four soils (James 2, 1 John, and Matthew 7)—which he covers in chapter 16.
- b. "Bare faith cannot save" adds the qualifier *bare* to *faith*. *Bare faith* is not found in the Bible. The only qualifying words I can find before *faith* in the NT are: *great* (twice),¹⁴ *little* (five times),¹⁵ and *sincere* (twice).¹⁶

For Schreiner, *bare faith* means "intellectual assent."¹⁷ He describes this kind of faith as one that does not result in eternal life by saying, "A 'claiming' faith, a 'saying' faith, an 'assenting' faith without any accompanying works is not a saving faith."¹⁸

Once again, he states the requirement for "accompanying works." Notice that he adds another qualifying word—*saving*—to faith. This phrase is not found in the Bible. Putting qualifiers on faith creates different "kinds" of faith. Despite the biased NET translation of Jas 2:14 (emphasis mine), "Can this *kind* of faith save him?" (compare to the NKJV "Can faith save him?"), the Bible does not speak of different kinds of faith. The Bible does talk about faith having different objects or content, but not different kinds of faith.¹⁹

- c. "Final justification or final salvation" is another example of adding qualifying words before a significant term, resulting in a phrase not found in the Bible. Other theologians have begun to write about "initial salvation" and "final salvation." Here (Figure 1) is a diagram of what they say:

¹⁴ Matthew 8:10 and Luke 7:9.

¹⁵ Matthew 6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; Luke 12:28.

¹⁶ First Timothy 1:5 and 2 Tim 1:5.

¹⁷ "By bare faith, I refer to what is often called intellectual assent to a set of statements, doctrines, or beliefs." See Schreiner, *Faith Alone*, 191.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Faith is being convinced that something is true. A person can believe one thing but not another. A believer can believe in Jesus for eternal life but not believe something else He says—for example, that a believer is to forgive those who sin against him or her.

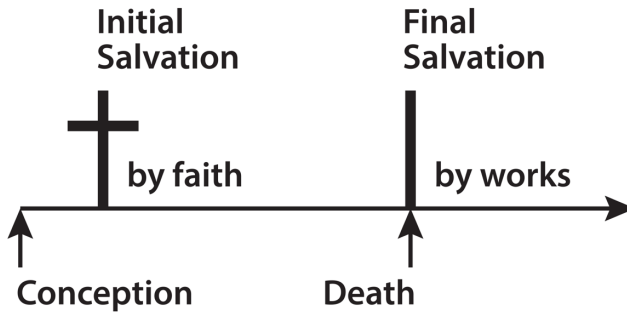


Figure 1: Initial and Final Salvation

The arrow represents the timeline of a person's life. It begins at conception, when we become individual human beings created by God. Our physical life continues until we die. Hopefully, sometime along the way, we believe in Jesus for eternal life.

Reformed writers increasingly refer to the point of believing in Jesus for eternal life as "Initial Salvation." They view this as being by faith alone. But since a person has to persevere in faith and good works until the end of his or her physical life, they refer to the point of death as "Final Salvation." This final salvation is by works in the sense that a person's good works confirm their genuine faith.²⁰ Or, in Thomas Schreiner's language, "works are necessary for final justification or final salvation."

In the phrase, "bare faith cannot save," we see from Schreiner's perspective that bare faith is insufficient, and not effective. In other words, something is missing. It is incomplete.

I am going to illustrate my understanding of what Schreiner is saying with two circles. This is *my* diagram, not Thomas Schreiner's. He might say that my diagram does not accurately represent his view. I am not intending to misrepresent him.

Because "bare faith cannot save," the "bare faith" circle has a section missing (Figure 2). It is incomplete because "works are necessary."

²⁰ "People can claim to believe, but the reality of their faith is demonstrated in their actions. Their actions reveal whether they have a bare faith when they nod in mental agreement but nothing more." Schreiner, *Faith Alone*, 193.



Figure 2: Bare Faith

If that missing section is filled in with works, then the overall picture of faith is considered, from Schreiner's perspective, to be "genuine faith" (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Genuine Faith Includes Works

Integrating works ("works are necessary") into faith fills in the gap, or incompleteness, of "bare faith" and results in "genuine faith."

B. Problems with Dividing Salvation into Initial Salvation and Final Salvation

The NT never divides salvation into initial salvation and final salvation. Nor does it ever divide justification into initial justification and final justification. These concepts are foreign to the NT.

The Bible *does* talk about being delivered (i.e., saved) from various things or situations. Paul was delivered (Greek *salvation*) from death on a boat in Acts 27:34. The disciples were delivered (Greek *saved*) from drowning in Matt 8:25. Many were delivered (Greek *saved* or *were cured*) from sickness in Mark 6:56. Gentile believers are delivered (“have been saved” = justification salvation before God) from eternal condemnation in Eph 2:8-9. Noah and his family were delivered (Greek *saved through*) from death during the flood. So, salvation can be from a variety of situations, but the NT knows nothing of “Initial Salvation” and “Final Salvation.”

The NT never presents two kinds of “justification before God” salvations—one by faith and one by works—that determine whether a person has eternal life. Rather, when a person believes in Jesus for eternal life, he or she has eternal life at the moment he or she believes. Notice the present tense *has* (twice) in John 5:24:

Truly, truly, I say to you, the one who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, *has* eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but *has* passed out of death into life.

We believe in Jesus for eternal life and it starts immediately!

We do not live our physical life on probation to see whether we are good enough at the end of life to receive eternal life. Jeremy Myers in his book *What is Faith?* says, “Faith does not begin with simple belief, and then end with allegiance...[or] ongoing obedience.”²¹

C. Problems with Integrating Works into the Meaning of Faith

Schreiner’s statement mingles faith and works. He clearly states that genuine faith has to include works. He is saying something slightly different from the assertion that works are an inevitable outcome of faith. He says that genuine faith *includes* works. This is a different statement because it actually makes works part of the definition of *faith*.

²¹ Jeremy Myers, *What is Faith?* (Dallas: Redeeming Press, 2019), 163.

Faith and works are separate issues that cannot be confused, blended, co-mingled, merged, or mixed. It is crucial to understand that faith and works are mutually exclusive.²² That is why we can say, “Faith without works is still faith.” They are separate issues.

D. Six Verses That Show Faith and Works Are Mutually Exclusive

Let us ask the question that Paul asks in Rom 4:3: “What does the Scripture say?”

- a. Romans 3:28: “For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.”

In this context, Paul first states that “God’s displeasure with humanity is manifest” (1:18–3:20). As a result, “Humanity faces God’s impartial judgment” (2:6–3:20).²³ Paul then writes: “The unrighteous can obtain righteousness through Jesus Christ” (3:21–5:11).²⁴

Paul talks about faith apart from works. He can only make such a statement if faith and works are different issues. He does not present faith as including works or works as including faith, but talks about them as being completely separate.

- b. Romans 4:5: “But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness.”

This passage is in the same section of Romans as Rom 3:28 (above).

Notice the contrast in the phrase, “not work, but believes.” This clarifies that Paul does not consider works to be part of faith.

In his commentary on Romans, Douglas Moo says, “Paul’s purpose in vv. 4-5, then, is to show that the faith that justifies is ‘faith alone,’ faith ‘apart from works.’”²⁵

- c. Galatians 2:16: “Nevertheless, knowing that a person is not justified by works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the Law; since by works of the Law no flesh will be justified.”

²² Ibid., 126. “Both faith and works, by definition, are mutually exclusive.”

²³ Zane C. Hodges, *Romans: Deliverance from Wrath* (Corinth, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2013), 18-19.

²⁴ Ibid., 19.

²⁵ Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 265.

The context of Gal 2:1-21 is about being clear concerning “the truth of the gospel” (v 4), stemming from the situation of Peter not eating (presumably at the Lord’s Supper)²⁶ with the Gentiles in Antioch (v 12). Paul viewed this situation as important enough to call for correction and clarity (i.e., “not straightforward about the truth of the gospel,” v 14). This is why he called Peter out.

Paul then emphasizes in verse 16 that belief in Jesus is the only requirement for eternal life (for justification before God). Paul says it three times in this one verse: “through *faith* in Christ Jesus,” “even we have *believed* in Christ Jesus,” and “by *faith* in Christ.”

Just to be clear, Paul also contrasts *belief* with *works* two times in this passage: “*not* justified by works...but through faith,” and “justified by faith...*not* by works.”

Faith and works are spoken of as mutually exclusive issues. They are not mixed, nor are they confused.

- d. Ephesians 2:8-9: “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this *is* not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God; not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”

In this context, Paul explains how God has reconciled the Jews and Gentiles to each other—and both groups to Himself.²⁷ The focus in this passage is on how Gentiles (*you*) are saved (i.e., the “justification-before-God” salvation).

Notice the contrast again between faith and works: “through *faith*...the gift of God; not a result of *works*.” *Faith* and *gift* are separate and opposite from *works*.

Ephesians 2:8-9 gives us the relationship between *grace* and *faith*. Eternal life is “by grace,” or God’s favor, because it is a “gift of God.” Once again *grace* and *faith* are contrary to *works*.

- e. Romans 11:6: “But if *it is* by grace, *it is* no longer on the basis of works, since *otherwise* grace is no longer grace.”

In the context of Romans 11, Paul addresses whether or not God has abandoned the nation of Israel. He concludes that God has not

²⁶ Robert N. Wilkin, “Galatians,” in *The Grace New Testament Commentary*, ed. Robert N. Wilkin (Denton, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2019), 407. “While this could refer to any meal, it most likely refers to the Lord’s Supper, because a number of NT passages suggest that the Lord’s Supper involved a full meal (e.g. Matt 26:26-30; Acts 2:42, 46; 1 Cor 11:17-34).”

²⁷ J. B. Bond, “Ephesians,” in *The Grace New Testament Commentary*, ed. Robert N. Wilkin (Denton, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2019), 422.

abandoned Israel. “In the same way then” (v 5)—as in the days of Elijah, so in Paul’s day—“God had *kept for himself*, those who had responded to His grace in Christ.”²⁸ Paul continues, saying (v 6) that God’s keeping of Jewish believers in his day was a matter of God’s grace, not having anything to do with their Law-related works or with good deeds the people were doing.

In a wording similar to that of Eph 2:8-9, Rom 11:6 contrasts grace and works. Paul views them as mutually exclusive concepts. In this passage, Paul even says that if works of the people of Israel are somehow mixed in with God’s grace or favor, then it is no longer grace.

f. James 2:17: “In the same way, faith also, if it has no works, is dead.”

In Jas 2:1-13, James explains the importance of believers not showing partiality or discrimination toward poor people by giving rich people preferential treatment. He shows (2:14-26) how important it is for believers to act on their faith in order: 1) to be helpful to other believers; 2) to mature their faith; and 3) to see God deliver believers when they take a stand for Him against culture.²⁹

The word *dead* has been explained in various ways, from “unresponsive” to “nonexistent.” Figure 4 pictures the concept of “faith without works is dead” (Jas 2:17, 20, 26).

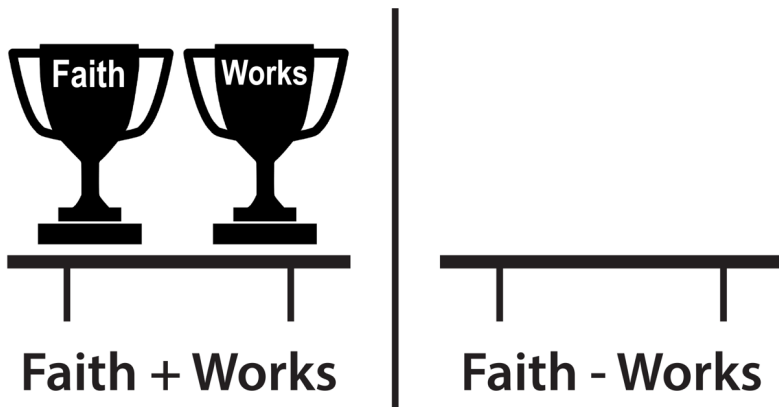


Figure 4: Faith Without Works Is Dead

²⁸ Zane C. Hodges, “Romans,” in *The Grace New Testament Commentary*, ed. Robert N. Wilkin (Denton, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2019), 335.

²⁹ David Janssen, “The Usefulness of Faith (James 2:14-26),” *Grace in Focus* (Jan & Feb 2015): 9-11.

The left side represents someone who has both faith and works “on the shelf.” The person on the right may claim to have faith, but without works, faith is nonexistent.

Look once more at Jas 2:17. I did not quote the whole sentence. The entire sentence/verse reads: “In the same way, faith also, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself.” The accurate diagram (Figure 5), therefore, would look like this:



Figure 5: Faith Without Works Is Still Faith

Since faith without works is “being by itself,” that means it is still there (on the right)! How can that be? Because *“faith without works is still faith.”*

There is no room for mixing faith and works. As Jeremy Myers accurately says, “There are no works in faith, for faith is the opposite of works.”³⁰

IV. WHAT ABOUT, “FAITH ALONE SAVES, BUT SAVING FAITH IS NOT ALONE”?

The popular saying, “Faith alone saves, but saving faith is not alone,” tries to communicate the idea that works must follow belief. Yet the wording is not clear and, upon closer examination, does not make sense.

³⁰ Myers, *What is Faith?* 163.

Let us compare the first and second phrases. If we reword the first phrase—“Faith alone saves”—to make it more like the second phrase, a person could say, “Faith alone is saving.” Let us look at it that way:

“Faith alone saves.” = “Faith alone *is saving*.”

Now let us look at the second phrase—“Saving faith is not alone.” If we reword this one slightly, it could say, “Faith that is not alone is saving.” Look at it this way:

“Saving faith is not alone.” = “Faith *that* is not alone *is saving*.”

Now compare: “Faith *alone* is saving.”

“Faith *that is not alone* is saving”

The two phrases contradict each other. Both statements cannot be true. The way the saying is normally expressed—“Faith alone saves, but saving faith is not alone”—basically puts two contradictory statements together in one sentence. This saying is not correct and solves nothing. For a more thorough analysis of this saying, see Fred Lybrand’s book, *Back to Faith*.³¹

V. CERTAINTY ABOUT ETERNAL LIFE

There is an ongoing discussion about whether “assurance is of the essence of saving faith.” Does a person need to know he or she has eternal life as confirmation of his or her belief? Although it is a topic worthy of much debate,³² when I talk to people on the street about Jesus, it just does not seem that difficult. Until they get to the point that they “know they have eternal life” because of what Jesus promised, they have not believed the message of life.

What does it mean to believe? My general working definition for the word *believe* is, “to be convinced that something is true, resulting in certainty.” As you can see, I include *certainty* in my definition of *to believe*. This is how belief works in daily life.

If you ask someone, “Do you believe this?” he or she may reply, “I am not sure,” because until the person is sure, he or she does not believe it. It is not complicated.

Before I went into ministry, I was an engineer. In that field, there is an illustration of this point.

³¹ Fred Lybrand, *Back to Faith: Reclaiming Gospel Clarity in an Age of Incongruence* (Maitlan, FL: Xulon Press, 2009). He addresses the contradiction of “Faith alone saves, but saving faith is not alone” in chapter 2: “The Cliché Is Logically Invalid.” He does so in a more nuanced and complete way than I have presented here.

³² See Vacendak, “Is Assurance of Salvation,” 391.

A. Illustration: Closed-Loop Control System

Figure 6 is a diagram of a closed-loop control system with an input, process, output, and feedback.³³

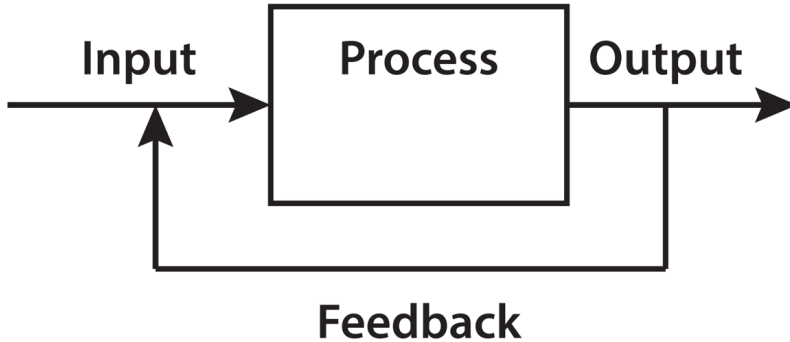


Figure 6: A Closed-Loop Control System Block Diagram

This process is widespread in everyday life. For example, you have a thermostat on the wall in your house that works using this closed-loop system. You set your thermostat to a specific temperature (Input). If the temperature is cooler than that setting, the furnace will be turned on (Process). When the room temperature matches the thermostat setting (Output), the thermostat will turn off the furnace based on the actual room temperature (Feedback), because it matches the temperature you set it to.

This is also a very workable model for communication. Let me apply it to sharing the message of life.

B. Application to Certainty of Eternal Life

When I am talking to someone about Jesus, toward the beginning of our conversation, I try to ask a modified Evangelism Explosion question: “When you die and stand before God, if He were to ask you, ‘Why should I let you into my Heaven?’ what would you say?” Their answer tells me what they are trusting in (what they believe) to be accepted by God. Then I tell them the message of life.

Here is how it follows the closed-loop system diagram (Figure 7). When I talk with someone about Jesus, I give them input. They

³³ Benjamin Kuo, *Automatic Control Systems* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1975), 5.

are thinking and deciding whether they are persuaded or convinced (Process) about what I am saying about Jesus or not. They come to a conclusion (Output) concerning their thoughts. Either they are convinced, and thus believe, or not. I do not know what they are thinking or what they have concluded without asking for their opinion (Feedback).

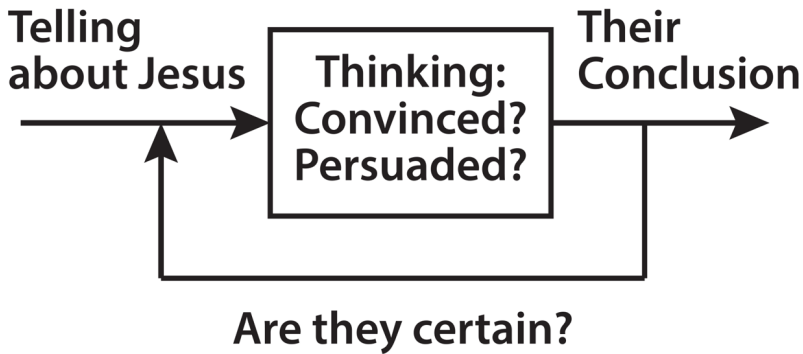


Figure 7: Sharing the Message of Life with Someone

After interacting with them, I will ask them if what I have shared makes sense. Then I will ask if they believe what Jesus says. The conversation is more detailed, depending on the person and situation. If they seem to understand the message of life, I ask them again: “When you die and stand before God, if He were to ask you, ‘Why should I let you into my Heaven?’ what would you say?”

If they answer correctly (i.e., “I believe in Jesus, so I have eternal life.”), I then ask, “Anything else?” People who understand what Jesus is promising will say “no.” Others might add other things—usually works of some kind—so then we go back and review again. I am listening to see if they are certain they have eternal life based on God’s promise of eternal life rather than on their performance. I am not convinced they “believe in Jesus for eternal life” until they are clear and certain.

We see this closed-loop process in 1 John 5:11-13.

And the testimony is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. The one who has the Son has the life; the one who does not have the Son of God does not have the life. 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.

INPUT: Verses 11 and 12. Eternal life is a gift from God. Whether a person has eternal life or not is determined by whether he or she “has the Son” or “does not have the Son.”

PROCESS: “You who believe in the name of the Son of God....” Are they convinced or persuaded concerning Jesus and His promise of everlasting life?

OUTPUT: People are in one of two categories: Believe and have eternal life, or do not believe and do not have everlasting life. The output is digital.

FEEDBACK: They can “*know*” that they “have eternal life,” not just hope they have everlasting life. So, God through John wants us to have *certainty* about eternal life.

When someone says they believe in Jesus for eternal life, *and* they are 100 percent *certain* they have eternal life because of Jesus, then I have confidence that they understand.

VI. ONE APPLICATION: PERSONAL TESTIMONY

Sometimes we inadvertently bring works into our view of salvation, making works a requirement. This is sometimes done when people give their testimony of how they were saved.

Typically, when people prepare their testimony, they produce an outline with three parts: 1) their life before they were saved; 2) their conversion experience; and 3) how their life has changed since their conversion. I call this a “Works Testimony.”

People sometimes tell me: “You need to hear such-and-such’s testimony. It is a great one!” They usually mean Jesus has made a dramatic change in the person’s life. Seeing Jesus accomplish a dramatic change in someone’s life is fantastic. Praise Jesus! But we may accidentally communicate that receiving everlasting life is about how much we change our lives. A “great” testimony might be: “I was an evil drug dealer, then I met Jesus (usually in some dramatic experience). Then I gave away everything I owned, and now I serve the homeless full time.”

That is all great, but sometimes it sends a wrong message: Going from bad works to good works is what salvation is about.

There is also the problem of someone who is *not* a terrible, evil, person but has believed in Jesus to receive God's life. There was not a dramatic change in their life because they were already functional and responsible.

I think a better approach is what I might call a "Belief Testimony." Kathryn Wright has written about this perspective.³⁴ In this case, people are instructed to write their testimony about: 1) their thinking before believing in Jesus; 2) the situation and circumstances of believing in Jesus; and 3) their thinking after believing in Jesus.

Before believing in Jesus, they recognize their need for God either because of their moral failures or realization that they do not have a relationship with God. They sense a need for God.

Believing in Jesus is becoming persuaded or convinced that eternal life is only found in Jesus because He offers it as a free gift. This usually comes as a result of reading or hearing one of God's promises concerning eternal life, such as John 3:16.

The result is a certainty in knowing they have eternal life and a new relationship with God. Their thinking has changed. Perhaps their life changed as well, but that is not the main thing. What they believed changed. That is the main thing.

This outline emphasizes what a person believes and the changes in their thinking. This happens to be what my testimony looks like (see Appendix A).

The testimony I like to hear the most is of someone who was raised in a Christian home who heard the message of life many times. Then, at some point—hopefully at an early age—they realized that they needed Jesus and believed in Him for eternal life. This kind of testimony does not have the dramatic change from a terrible person to a virtual saint as its main point. It does have a focus on coming to believe in Jesus for eternal life.

VII. CONCLUSION

Biblically speaking, "Faith without works is still faith." This truth is foundational to having certainty of everlasting life. That certainty is based on God's promise, not our performance.

³⁴ Wright, Kathryn. "Paul's Blueprint for How to Give Your Testimony." FaithAlone.org, May 1, 2023. <https://faithalone.org/grace-in-focus-articles/pauls-blueprint-for-how-to-give-your-testimony-acts-22/>.

A young woman met with me who was unclear about whether or not she had eternal life. She knew her Bible fairly well but was still uncertain concerning her need for works or a changed life as proof of eternal salvation. This was the result of various unbiblical teachings she had heard. So, we looked at passages about the promise of eternal life, including 1 John 5:11-13. At the end of our discussion, I asked: "When you die and stand before God, if He were to ask you, 'Why should I let you into my Heaven?' what would you say?"

She replied, "I believe in Jesus."

Then I asked, "Anything else?"

She said, "You [God] promised!"

APPENDIX A

My personal testimony illustrates what I believed and was thinking before, during, and after I believed in Jesus for everlasting life. This is not a “works” testimony but a “belief” testimony.

A. My thinking *before* I believed in Jesus.

I grew up attending a Lutheran church that was on the liberal end of the theological spectrum. So, the Bible was viewed respectfully but was not clearly taught.

I was baptized as a baby. I went to Confirmation, which included learning the Ten Commandments and the Apostles’ Creed.

My grandfather died when I was a senior in high school. During his funeral, I wondered: *Where is my grandfather? What happens when a person dies? What will happen to me when I die? Can anybody even know?*

So even though I had attended church regularly while growing up, I did not have answers to these questions.

If someone had asked me the Evangelism Explosion question, I would have probably answered: “I believe in God. I got baptized. I go to church. I *try* to do what is right and follow the Ten Commandments, and I *hope* when I get there, my good deeds outweigh my bad deeds.”

Try and *hope* are the keywords.

B. My thinking *when* I believed in Jesus.

Someone on staff with Campus Crusade for Christ came to my dormitory room and took me through the little booklet, *The Four Spiritual Laws*. From growing up in church, I knew 1) God loved me; 2) I was a sinner; and 3) Jesus had died on the cross for our sins. But I had not previously heard 4) I needed to believe in Jesus for eternal life. This was a new idea. I concluded that I did believe in Jesus for eternal life.

The Four Spiritual Laws booklet includes a prayer to tell God you choose to believe in Jesus. I prayed that prayer, and the experience was very disappointing.³⁵ I expected some angels to show up, or music to play, or something spectacular to happen. I figured something this big and important should include some supernatural experience, but

³⁵ The booklet’s mention of this prayer can certainly lead to confusion. Nobody has ever been saved from the lake of fire because they prayed. They are saved by believing in Jesus for eternal life.

nothing happened. Nevertheless, I became a new creature in Christ that day during my freshman year in college because I had believed in Jesus for eternal life.

C. My thinking *after* I believed in Jesus.

The staff person talking to me, Dave Bair, carefully reviewed and made sure I understood that believing in Jesus for eternal life was the condition. He reviewed this in John 3:16 and John 5:24 to make sure I understood I had eternal life.

The passage that was the most impactful to me was 1 John 5:11-23. I could not believe that no one ever told me about this passage. It was amazing to find out that a person could actually *know* he or she had eternal life. I had wondered if that was even possible, but now I knew. There was indeed a big change in my life, but not the way many Bible teachers teach. I had *certainty* about where I was going to go when I died. Little did I know, the adventure had just begun.

2006 REVISITED: ETERNAL SECURITY: DO YOU HAVE TO BELIEVE IT?¹

BY BOB BRYANT

I. INTRODUCTION

Last year, when it was announced that the theme for the 2023 GES conference was “Vital Free Grace Issues,” I thought that if Bob [Wilkin] asked me to speak, I knew what I wanted to talk about. He asked me to speak, so I am going to talk about “2006 Revisited.”

During the 2006 GES conference, some vital Free Grace issues were raised. They were brought to light and, to our surprise, they had been somewhat hidden up until that time. I was talking to Bob about this last night, and he considers 2006 a turning point for GES and the grace movement in a good way.

What happened in 2006 might be a surprise for some of you. But, if you were there, you will probably never forget it. It was quite dramatic.

About 360 people attended the 2006 GES conference at the Crowne Plaza in North Dallas.

The next year 160 attended the conference. That tells you that something must have happened at the 2006 conference.

II. TWO MESSAGES

It seems the changes were in response to two messages given at the 2006 GES conference: “Saved or in a State of Grace?” by Zane Hodges,² and my message entitled, “Eternal Security: Do You Have to Believe It?”³

Zane and I did not consult one another when we prepared these messages. We planned them separately. Not until we got close to the

¹ This article is from the transcript of Bob Bryant’s presentation. Certain small changes were made for readability. Footnotes were added later for support. Listen to his original presentation at: <https://FaithAlone.org/audio/2023-ges-national-conference-vital-free-grace-issues>.

² Zane Hodges, “Saved or in a State of Grace,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B8ZlkA4X5KI>. Accessed February 8, 2024.

³ Bob Bryant, “Eternal Security, Do You Have to Believe It?” Grace Evangelical Society, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=NLB-rLXtx1k>. Accessed February 8, 2024.

conference dates did we compare notes. I told Zane that I thought we were speaking on the same topic. He said he agreed.

Even though the topic was the same, the two messages were quite different in approach. I am going to briefly summarize my message and then briefly summarize Zane's.

A. My Message

I started my message by saying that I was going to describe a person. I wanted those attending to think about somebody they knew who might be such a person. It could be a friend, a relative, or a co-worker. This person is full of good works, a faithful church member, prays, and reads the Bible often. He believes Jesus is Lord, believes Jesus died for our sins, and believes that Jesus rose from the dead. But he has never believed that in Jesus he is eternally secure.

My question is: Is this person saved? Is this person born again? Is this person going to heaven or, to put it another way, could it be that a person who has never believed he is eternally secure saved?

I said it briefly in 2006, and I will say it today. There are different synonyms and different ways of saying *eternally secure*. You could say, "once saved always saved," or "as a child, I knew I would live with Christ forever."

As a child, I would have said that I knew for sure I was going to heaven, and nothing could change that. I knew for sure that I had a relationship with God that I could never lose. Those are all synonyms for the term *eternal security*.

When I asked if this hypothetical person who never believed he was eternally secure was saved, the keyword in the question was the word *never*. If you miss that word, you will miss a very important point. I wasn't talking then, or now, about somebody who was once sure that he was eternally secure and is not sure now. I am talking about a person who has never been sure or believed that he is eternally secure.

So, could a person be saved who has *never* believed that he is eternally secure? Many would answer "yes" to that question. What they are thinking is that eternal security is a follow-up doctrine that a born-again Christian may or may not embrace.

Let's go back to that question. Could it be that a person is saved who has never believed that he is eternally secure? What is most important is how Jesus answers that question.

1. Passages in John where Jesus answers the question

I want us to see that He does answer that question in His conversation with the woman at the well in John 4. He said to her, “If you knew the gift of God and who it is who says to you ‘give Me a drink,’ you would have asked Him and He would have given you living water.” Notice, that Jesus tells the woman that there are two things she must know: the gift and the Giver.

John is writing this so the reader of the Gospel of John will know that there are two things the reader needs to know: What is the gift, and Who is the Giver? Jesus tells the woman that if she knew those two things, she would have asked Him, and He would have given her living water.

Jesus goes on to tell her, and us, what the gift is.⁴ Speaking about the literal water in the well, the Lord told her that whoever drinks that water will thirst again. But, “Whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. The water that I shall give him will become in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.” That is the gift, and He makes it very clear that this is a gift you could never lose. It is defined by the term itself: *everlasting life*.

He made sure that she and the readers understood that once you have it, you will never thirst for it again. It is permanent. You cannot lose it.

Now, the woman got one part of it right. To begin with, she said to Him, “Sir, give me this water that I may not thirst nor come here to draw.” She thought He was talking about literal water. She still did not know that He was talking about everlasting life. Later, she got it, but the point here is that she knew it was permanent. Once you drink this water, you will never thirst again.

As we read on in John 4, we see that this woman did come to understand what the gift is. It is everlasting life, and she did believe in the Giver, Jesus, for that life.⁵

What I want to underscore is very important. Jesus is presenting the message of eternal security. He is teaching eternal security to an unsaved woman. He talks about life that you can never lose. You can never thirst for it again once you have it. He is not giving this to a

⁴ See, Zane C. Hodges, *A Free Grace Primer* (Denton, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2011), 17-24.

⁵ Edwin A. Blum, “John,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, eds. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 287.

Christian as a follow-up doctrine. He is speaking to an unsaved person as a part of the essential truth that she needs to believe to gain everlasting life.

We see Jesus do this repeatedly. He did it in chapter 3 with Nicodemus. He said, “You must be born again.” At the time Jesus was talking to him, what did He teach Nicodemus? What did He say to him? “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” That is what He is telling Nicodemus. God offers life that you can never lose once you have it. It is not probationary life. It is everlasting life. When you believe in Him for it—Jesus says, “When you believe in Me for it”—you have it.⁶

Here is my point. In John 3:16 Jesus is not teaching eternal security to a saved person as a follow-up doctrine. He is teaching eternal security to an unsaved person as an essential truth that he or she must believe in order to gain everlasting life.

When we come to chapter 5, we see Jesus again encountering Jews who sought to kill Him. What is He going to say to Jews who are trying to kill Him? Well, we do not have to guess. Jesus “answered and said to them, ‘Most assuredly I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life.’”

Jesus is teaching eternal security in John 5:24. He says that once you believe in Him, your past, present, and future are taken care of. It is a done deal. In the past, you have passed from death to life. In the present, you have everlasting life right now. In your future, you shall not come into judgment.⁷ The one who believes in Him is eternally secure. He is not giving a follow-up message to a believer as a follow-up doctrine. He is teaching eternal security to unsaved people—even the Jews who wanted to kill Him—because that is the essential truth. This is what they must believe in order to gain everlasting life.

In John 6, Jesus again encounters some unbelievers. He says to them, “You have seen Me and yet you do not believe.” What is Jesus going to say to people who do not believe in Him? In the very next verse He says, “All that the Father gives Me shall come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out.” He is teaching eternal

⁶ Robert N. Wilkin, “The Gospel According to John,” in *The Grace New Testament Commentary*, ed. Robert N. Wilkin (Denton, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2010), 376.

⁷ Hodges, *Primer*, 152.

security. “All [no exceptions] that the Father gives Me shall come to Me.” This means those who believe in Him. “The one who comes to Me [each and every one] I will by no means [no exceptions] cast out.”

This is eternal security as clearly as it can be taught.⁸ To whom is Jesus speaking? He is not speaking to believers as a follow-up doctrine. He is teaching unsaved people about eternal security because He knows that it is an essential truth that they must believe to be saved.

Notice what He says to these same people in verse 39—to these that He said see Him but do not believe. He says, “This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at the last day.”

Jesus is teaching eternal security to these unbelievers. He is saying, “Your eternal security does not depend upon your obedience to Me. It depends upon My obedience to the Father. The Father commanded Me—the Father sent Me—and told me that of all that He gives Me, I cannot lose a single one.” If one person believed in Jesus for everlasting life and then was lost, that would be on Jesus and His disobedience. But Jesus cannot disobey the Father, therefore the believer is eternally secure.

Jesus is not teaching this as a follow-up doctrine to someone who is saved. He is teaching it as an essential truth that unsaved people need to know in order to be saved and have everlasting life.

This continues in John 10. Jesus encounters more unbelievers. He says to them, “You do not believe, because you are not of My sheep.” What is Jesus going to say to these people who do not believe and are not His sheep? Well, here is what He tells them about His sheep: “I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father’s hand.”

Jesus teaches them, with the simplest and clearest visual illustration, that once you believe in Him, He and the Father hold you in their hand. The Father holds you in His hand. You cannot escape once you are saved. You are always saved. You are eternally secure, and nothing can change that. And once again I remind you that Jesus is not teaching this as a follow-up doctrine to people who are saved. He is teaching it as an essential truth. The truth of eternal security is being presented

⁸ Joseph C. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings* (Hayesville, NC: Schoettle Publishing Co., 2006), 510.

to unsaved people as essential truth that they must know. They must believe it in order to be saved and have eternal life.

Let me summarize what we have seen so far. We have looked at Nicodemus in chapter 3, the Samaritan woman in chapter 4, the Jews who sought to kill Him in chapter 5, those who would not believe in chapter 6, and those who are not His sheep in chapter 10.

We just read the clearest and strongest messages that you can find in the whole Bible about eternal security. He is teaching it to unsaved people. The message of eternal security is the saving message of Jesus. It is as clear as it could be that Jesus is telling unsaved people that you believe in Him for the gift, and the gift is everlasting life that you can never lose. You must know what the gift is and then believe He is the Giver who can give you that gift.

As we keep reading in the Gospel of John, we see Jesus continue to refer to eternal security. However, the next passage I want to discuss involves a believer. Jesus said to Martha these famous words, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die.”

That is eternal security. Once you have life, you can never lose it. You can never—once you have spiritual life—lose it.⁹

This time, He is presenting this truth to Martha, who is a believer. Her brother Lazarus has died. He is reminding her of the truth that she already knows. It is a comfort to her in the loss of her brother. John records this in chapter 11 because John has a strategic reason for putting it in the Gospel of John. We know what that reason is because he tells us at the end of the 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.”

John records this conversation with Martha in order to communicate once again to the reader—the unbelieving reader—that eternal security is an essential part of the saving message that must be believed in order for a person to be saved and have everlasting life.

One more passage in which Jesus teaches eternal security concerns Peter. Jesus says to him, “The rooster shall not crow till you have denied Me three times.” Then, He immediately adds, “Let not your heart be troubled...In My Father’s house are many mansions...I go to prepare a place for you.”

⁹ Robert N. Wilkin, *Faith Alone in 100 Verses* (Denton, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2020), 68-69.

Peter was already eternally secure, and he knew it. Peter needed that reminder because he was going to mess up. The Lord tells him that he is going to sin terribly, and he is told not to forget that he is eternally secure. The Lord will not let him go. He has a secure place in His Father's house. John records this for the unsaved reader of the Gospel of John so that the unsaved reader will know that if he or she believes in Jesus for eternal life, even if he or she messes up, like Peter did, he or she will still be secure.

So once again, the message for the unsaved reader is that eternal security is part of the saving message of Jesus. It is an essential truth that must be believed in order to be saved and have everlasting life.

2. A summary of my message

Allow me to go back to the question I raised earlier. Could a person who has never believed that he is eternally secure be saved? As I said, many would answer "yes" to that question. But Jesus and John would not. They would say "no."

I would like to look at this question from the other side of the coin and ask it this way: Do you have to believe in eternal security in order to have eternal life? Jesus and John answer "yes" to that question. That is a summary of my 2006 message on eternal security.

B. Zane Hodges' Message

I feel inadequate even to begin to summarize what Zane Hodges said. There is no substitute for Zane himself, so I will just try to give some highlights of his message, "Saved or in a State of Grace?" It is a brilliant message. If you haven't heard it, go online and listen to it. It is very creative, very intriguing, and very engaging. Let me describe the background.

He talked about two friends named Jason and Eric.

Jason believes he is eternally secure. Zane called him a "card-carrying GES member." Eric does not believe that he is eternally secure and Jason, as he should be, is concerned for his friend Eric. So, they get into a conversation about Acts 16:31, which says, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved."

Here is what Jason says to Eric: "Eric, in Acts 16:31 you have turned the word *saved* into a conditional, guaranteed-only-in-the-present, benefit. So really, Acts 16:31 should say, 'Believe on the Lord

Jesus Christ and you will be safe for the time being.’ You didn’t believe that you got saved from hell forever.”

So, Eric says, “Are you trying to tell me that I am not saved?” Jason replies, “I am trying to tell you that you are not even temporarily saved. You believed in Christ for something that God doesn’t give.”

Zane explained that Eric believed in God for probationary life. God doesn’t give probationary life. Then, Zane said that just because a person uses Biblical language to describe what they believe doesn’t mean they actually believe Biblical truth.

That is an important statement. That is one of the most profound statements you will ever hear. Just because somebody uses the Biblical language, “I’m saved,” does not mean that they are saved. Just because they say, “I believe in Jesus, and I am saved,” does not mean they are saved because they may be using Biblical language that isn’t really what the Bible is saying, in terms of its definition and truth.

That was a quick background on Zane’s message, and those were the two messages from 2006 that I wanted to review.

C. Looking Back and a Present Perspective

I am no longer in 2006 but in 2023. Looking back, I tell you that what Zane and I said that day was nothing new. If you were there, it felt as if people were saying, “Well, this is new.”

No, it wasn’t new. I am going to prove it to you.

Back then, in 2006, I didn’t think I would have to prove it. I just assumed that everybody knew this was nothing new.

In 1989, Zane wrote *Absolutely Free!* I don’t know if he would have called it his signature work, but at the time it was. When that book came out, I thought it got everybody’s attention, especially people in GES. This was clearly before the 2006 GES conference.

Here is a statement from *Absolutely Free!*: “A person who has never been sure of eternal life has never believed the saving message of God.”¹⁰

You know, when I read that in 1989, I had to pause and read it again because, I thought, “I’ve never heard it put like that. But, of course, that is true.” It took me about thirty seconds to think that through and I realized, “Well, of course that is true.” I had just never heard it so clearly put as Zane did at that time.

¹⁰ Zane C. Hodges, *Absolutely Free!: A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation* (Dallas, TX: Redención Viva, 1989), 51.

Let me move forward ten years to 1999, when Bob Wilkin's book, *Confident in Christ*, came out. Here is a quote from Bob Wilkin: "A person who has never had assurance that he is eternally secure has not yet been born again."¹¹ That is pretty clear, strong, and straightforward. And that is exactly what I said in 2006. And that is exactly what Zane said.

To be honest with you, before the 2006 conference, I thought that this was nothing new. I was under the assumption that everybody in GES had read *Absolutely Free!* and *Confident in Christ*. When those books were written there was no uproar, and I remember saying to Zane that I didn't know if I ought to teach on this at the 2006 conference because I felt I would just be preaching to the choir. I thought everybody would say they already knew and believed it. It was nothing new. That is what I thought. I had no idea how that day—that conference—was going to end.

I don't know whether it was at the very end of the conference, but somewhere toward the end, there was a panel discussion. The plenary speakers were all lined up, and all the people in the room were to interact with the speakers in front. But they didn't interact with the people in the front. They interacted all over the room. This person and that person wanted to say something about those two messages.

It was exciting. If you had been there, you wouldn't have taken a nap. It was charged. I had no idea that this was coming. I want to give you three highlights—three quotes—from what happened in that panel discussion.

About fifteen minutes in, Bob Wilkin stood up and said he wanted to take a survey. He asked how many of the people in the room were born again before they believed they were eternally secure. Now, take in that question: How many of you were born again before you believed you were eternally secure?

Fifty percent of the people in the room raised their hands. It took my breath away. It really did. I just couldn't believe it. What I learned—what we all learned—at that moment was that those fifty percent believed that eternal security is a follow-up doctrine for a Christian and not an essential truth that must be believed in order to gain everlasting life. They were saying they didn't believe it until later.

¹¹ Robert N. Wilkin, *Confident in Christ: Living by Faith Really Works* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1999), 96.

I am convinced that those people were saved later than they thought. They were not born again until the day they were sure they were eternally secure, but they thought they were saved before they knew they were eternally secure.

If you think that through, let me tell you what it means. Those people had to have believed that salvation is by faith plus works until they knew they were eternally secure, because if you don't believe you are eternally secure, then you can only be believing that you have to do something to stay saved. That means you must maintain your salvation by works.

So, all of a sudden it was dawning on me that I was part of this panel discussion and that fifty percent of the people there entertained, or definitely believed, the thought that a person who trusts in Christ plus their works—let alone does not believe that they are eternally secure—could be saved.

It was an amazing moment. Fifty percent of the people at a GES conference didn't believe that you have to believe in the Giver for the gift of everlasting life.

Let me tell you something. Those two messages didn't create that difference. That difference existed before the conference even started. We just didn't know it. We thought everybody believed the same thing until the 2006 conference came and light was shed on the fact that we didn't all believe the same thing about the saving message of Jesus. Wouldn't you agree that the saving message of Jesus is pretty important?

Here is another statement that was made by one of the most popular speakers and leaders of GES. He was highly respected and had a lot to say at this meeting. Here is one of his quotes: "My parents were wonderful Christians who, as far as I know, never believed they were eternally secure. So, if what Zane and Bob are saying is true, then my parents are in hell, and I have a hard time accepting that."

That is a heartbreaking quote. He doesn't want to believe what the Scriptures say because he doesn't want to think that his parents might be in hell. Hopefully, you realize that that is no way to try to determine theology—to go by your feelings and your desires of what you want for somebody. You have to start with: "What did Jesus say?"

A third quote from this same person is the one that I guess hit me the hardest. He said, "If what Zane and Bob are saying is true, then we

should be evangelizing Methodists, Nazarenes, and Assembly of God people.”

I will tell you what I thought when I heard that: I wished my mother were there because I wasn't expecting what he had said. I know my mother would have had something to say at that meeting. My mother would have said:

I grew up a Methodist. I was a Methodist until I was thirty-four years old. I believed what the Methodist Church taught me. I was living by what they taught me. I believed that to get to heaven, Jesus had to do His part, and He did it when He died on the cross for my sins. But I also believed what the Methodist Church taught me and that is to get to heaven I had to do my part, which was to try to live a good life. Hopefully, at the end of my life, God would accept me based on my works.

One day, when I was eight years old, my mother took me and my younger sisters for swimming lessons. While we were out in the water, the mothers were on the shore talking, and this woman named Lynn Mulchin invited my mother to her church in a neighboring town. My mother accepted that invitation. My mother taught me through childhood and all the way through my teenage and even adult years that this was a turning point in the life of our family. When we got into that church, we heard a different message. We heard that Jesus said, “He who believes in Me has everlasting life.”

My mother took that message to heart and realized that Jesus wasn't asking her to live a good life in order to earn everlasting life. He was telling her just to believe in Him for what He offers. It is a free gift—the Giver for the gift. My mother came to see that Jesus said that “he that believes in Me has everlasting life” and that everlasting life doesn't begin when you die. It begins the moment you believe. You can know that you have it right now, and once you are saved, you are always saved. My mother saw those issues as going hand-in-hand—that eternal security is the saving message of Jesus.

My mother drilled it into me. Once you are saved, you are always saved. She told me that I should never quit thanking God for Lynn Mulchin, who invited our family to her church, where we could hear that message. She said, “I hate to think where our family would be

right now. We would maybe have been lost forever if somebody hadn't evangelized us."

I think my mother would have said that if she had been at the 2006 conference and had received the opportunity to speak.

Now, let me talk about a couple of things that happened after the 2006 conference.

III. AFTER THE 2006 CONFERENCE

A lot of things happened after the 2006 conference, but I would like to tell you about two very small meetings related to it that I think were important.

A. The First Meeting

In 2006, Zane Hodges, Bob Wilkin, and I met. Zane asked Bob and me to come to his office because he wanted to talk about the 2006 conference. He wanted us to talk about where he thought the simple focus should be for GES in the future. He made it very simple. He said we should identify our message as the saving message of Jesus.

Now, that is a very profound statement. We might have tended to assume that we were doing that, but in Zane's viewpoint, we were not doing enough of it—that is, just saying that, we are coming back to what Jesus said. What were Jesus' words when He talked to people about everlasting life? What did Jesus say? We need to keep coming back to Jesus and what He said.

Zane said that we needed to keep it as simple as we can, and that is as simple as we can get. Believe in Jesus for everlasting life. That is what Jesus said repeatedly: "Believe in Me for everlasting life." Or, as He told the woman at the well—and it all goes back to John 4:10 in my mind—believing in the Giver for the gift.

There it is, right there. It is so simple. You have to know what the gift is and believe in the Giver for the gift. Just come back to that. Keep it simple: Believe the Giver for the gift.

That is the saving message of Jesus. The saving message of Jesus is not: Believe that Jesus died for our sins. Now, you could not have everlasting life if Jesus did not die for your sins, but Jesus never told anybody to believe that He would die for their sins in order to go to heaven. He never said that. That is not the saving message of Jesus. It

is the saving truth behind the message, but it is not the message that Jesus told people.

As you look at those two statements (“Believe in Jesus for eternal life” and “Believe that Jesus died for our sins”), they are very important for us to think about. Bob Wilkin thought a lot about it, as have other people. But I am singling out Bob because I did a search on the GES website for the 2006 conference. It is very interesting how many articles the 2006 conference provoked Bob to write.

You need to look up one of those articles and read it: “Four Free Grace Views Related to Two Issues.”¹² He wrote this in 2009, as he was still thinking about the aftermath of the 2006 conference.

Until the 2006 conference, we thought there was one Free Grace position. After the 2006 conference, we realized there were four Free Grace views related to two issues. These differences existed before the conference. They just came to light because of the conference.

So, what are the four Free Grace views related to the two issues? First, here are the two issues: Believe in Jesus for everlasting life, and believe that Jesus died for our sins.

When it comes to the second issue, Bob points out in his article that some expand it. They might say you have to also believe that Jesus is God, or that He was born of a virgin, or that He is coming again. Some add up to six things, but for simplicity’s sake, let’s focus on just this one.

The first Free Grace view is the one that Bob, Zane, and I hold to, and hopefully, you do as well. The unbeliever is to believe in Jesus for everlasting life. I hope that is your view.

But some who call themselves Free Grace say “No, it is both. You have to believe both that Jesus died for your sins and believe that He gives everlasting life. If you don’t believe both, then you cannot be saved.” This would be the second view.

The third view is the unbeliever must only believe the second line. He needs to believe that Jesus died for his sins. You can exclude the first line. If you believe that Jesus died for your sins, the result is that you get everlasting life. It is not that you believe in Jesus for everlasting life. You believe that He died for your sins. God then gives you everlasting

¹² Bob Wilkin, “Four Free Grace Views Related to Two Issues: Assurance and the Five Essentials.” FaithAlone.org, Grace Evangelical Society, July 1, 2009. <https://faithalone.org/grace-in-focus-articles/assurance-and-the-five-essentials>. Accessed February 8, 2024.

life even though you do not know that you have it. You found out later that He gave it to you. That is the third view.

Concerning the fourth view that Bob addresses in his article, he says he knows hardly anybody who holds it. But some people do not believe that you have to believe either one of these two statements. There are Free Grace people who say you don't have to believe in Jesus for eternal life or believe that He died for your sins. I had never heard of that, but in recent months Mike Lii has told me he has heard of it. And that view is: Believe that Jesus was sent from God.

Some people who call themselves Free Grace say you don't have to believe in Jesus for everlasting life, and you don't have to believe that He died for your sins in order to be saved. You just have to believe that He was sent from God.

Now, I have gone over four Free Grace views. Some people call themselves Free Grace, but we are not all on the same page with each other. The prophet Amos said, "How can two walk together unless they be agreed."¹³ If we do not agree on the saving message of Jesus, how can we walk together? It is sad, but it is true.

The GES conference in 2006 did not create these differences. These differences existed before the conference. The conference just brought them to light. We are not saying the same thing that people need to believe. We have different saving messages. We cannot walk together if we are not in agreement on the saving message of Jesus.

Just to review the 2006 meeting with Zane, Bob, and me, it was determined that we should identify our message as the saving message of Jesus: Believe in Jesus for everlasting life. There was another meeting on June 19, 2006.

B. The Second Meeting

Bob [Wilkin] met with some GES speakers in June 2006. This was a private meeting involving about ten people. One of the men told Bob that GES would lose numbers and financial support over this. Bob said he was prepared for that and was ready to die for this issue.

Thank God for you, Bob Wilkin, because you have lived that out. You haven't been afraid. You haven't backed down. You stood up for the saving message of Jesus and gave leadership that we very much need to

¹³ Amos 3:3.

this organization. I thank God for you. Thank you for being willing to die for that message: Believe in Jesus for everlasting life.

IV. CONCLUSION

I want to conclude with Zane's conclusion, as well as mine, from the conference in 2006. Zane said that if you have a good friend who thinks he could lose his salvation, or if you know anybody like that, do not just assume they are eternally saved if they themselves do not believe they are. If you take that attitude, you are not being responsible in handling the truth of God. Tell people what God says and tell them what He means by what He says.

In my conclusion at the conference, I said that we have an obligation to talk to people everywhere about eternal security because eternal security is what Jesus talked to people about. It is an essential part of the message that they must believe in order to receive everlasting life.

I want to conclude with a quote from my mother, even though she didn't say it. She is in heaven now, and I will talk to her about it when I get there. But I am going to put words in her mouth, and I know she would say, "That's OK, Bob."

This is what my mother would have said in 2006, and she would say it again now in 2023: "Please be like Lynn Mulchin and evangelize people like me and my family—people who are not yet saved because they have not yet believed that they are eternally secure."

FOCUSED FREE GRACE VERSUS FLEXIBLE FREE GRACE: CAN TWO WALK TOGETHER?

MIKE LII

I. INTRODUCTION

Free Grace Theology is unified around the concepts that (a) salvation is by faith in some truth about Jesus and (b) this salvation, when received, can never be lost (eternal security). However, Free Grace theologians do not agree on the concepts of (1) the content of the necessary truth to be believed about Jesus in order to be saved and (2) whether this necessary truth to be believed includes the concept of eternal security.

This article describes two different systems of Free Grace Theology. These two systems essentially differ on whether eternal life is an essential part of the saving message and whether one is assured with 100 percent certainty of eternal life when he or she believes the saving message.

This article uses the terms, *gospel*, *eternal life*, and *everlasting life* as follows:

- Although Biblically the term *gospel* simply means good news, this article will use the term to refer specifically to the good news of the saving message of Jesus.
- When this article uses the terms *eternal life* or *everlasting life*, it refers to the Biblical definition, which is: a guaranteed life with Jesus forever that can never be lost. In other words, the terms *eternal life* and *everlasting life* include the concept of eternal security.

II. WHAT ARE FOCUSED FREE GRACE AND FLEXIBLE FREE GRACE?

Under the banner of Free Grace Theology, we have two divergent positions. This article will distinguish between these two positions with the terms *Focused Free Grace* and *Flexible Free Grace*.

A. Focused Free Grace and Flexible Free Grace Defined

The difference between these two positions comes down to the answers to two questions regarding the content of the gospel and assurance:

1. Content: What must I believe to be saved?
2. Assurance: Am I assured of eternal life when I believe the saving message?

For Focused Free Grace, the answer to question 1, regarding the content to be believed for salvation is: “You must believe in Jesus’ promise of everlasting life to all who believe in Him for it.” Focused Free Grace’s answer to question 2, regarding assurance, is: “Yes, there is always assurance of eternal life when believing the saving message.”

Because of the content of the promise that is believed, one who is currently believing this promise currently knows for sure that he or she has everlasting life. Otherwise, he or she is not believing. In other words, “Assurance of eternal life is of the essence of saving faith.”

For Flexible Free Grace, the answer to question 1 is: “You must believe in Jesus, but you do **not** need to believe in Jesus for eternal life.” For Flexible Free Grace, there is flexibility in whether to include everlasting life in the saving message.

Flexible Free Grace’s answer to question 2 is: “Assurance of eternal life is **not** always present when believing in Jesus because of the flexibility in whether to include eternal life in the gospel.” You can have people who are currently believing in Jesus—which results in eternal life—but who are unsure of whether they have eternal life. In other words, “Assurance of eternal life is optional for saving faith.”

Therefore, we have two significantly different views within Free Grace Theology. Focused Free Grace adherents consider everlasting life an essential part of the gospel and believe that assurance of everlasting life is of the essence of believing the gospel. Flexible Free Grace adherents view eternal life and assurance of eternal life as optional in both presenting and believing the gospel.

B. Messrs. A, B, C, and D of Flexible Free Grace

What would be a fair, unbiased way to determine who has created the best-tasting, jarred, pasta sauce? The evaluation should be done “blind.” Tasters should judge or evaluate the different pasta sauces

without knowing the brands of the sauces they are tasting. Otherwise, taste testers may end up choosing the most famous brand rather than the best-tasting pasta sauce.

Like a blind taste test, this article will provide quotations from four teachers who identify themselves as Free Grace, but their identities, as well as the citation information, will be in the endnotes rather than the footnotes. This article will refer to these four Free Grace teachers as Messrs. A, B, C, and D,ⁱ so we can better evaluate their theology without a bias toward fame or credentials.

I have been blessed by some of Messrs. A, B, C, and D's teaching, financially supported one of their ministries for over two decades, and even helped that ministry set up its initial website. Another of these teachers once asked me about the possibility of working for his ministry. Any criticism in this article is directed solely at the leaders' theology and not at them, personally, or any of their ministries.

III. ESSENTIAL DIFFERENCE IN WHETHER ETERNAL LIFE MUST BE INCLUDED IN THE SAVING MESSAGE

A. Focused Free Grace: Two Non-Negotiables of the Saving Message

At the GES National Conference in 2000, Zane Hodges made the following remarks regarding the non-negotiable content of the gospel, foreshadowing the issues this article raises:

There are two non-negotiables here.

Number one, no salvation anywhere for anybody apart from the name of Jesus. Now by that, we are talking about the *Jesus of the New Testament*. Not *Jesus Espinoza*, who lives in the barrio in Los Angeles. We are certainly not talking about Mr. X, in whom we have believed, and oh, we discover later that it is Jesus. No, in this age, you must believe in Jesus, the Jesus of the New Testament. That is one non-negotiable.

The other non-negotiable is that you must believe that He *guarantees eternal salvation* or that He gives everlasting life. Dr. Charles Ryrie used to say that if you could lose everlasting life, it has the wrong name. It is not everlasting.

So, the two non-negotiables are very simple: Number one, the *Jesus of the New Testament must be the focus of a person's faith*, and the person *believes that the Jesus of the New Testament provides and guarantees his eternal destiny*" (emphasis added).¹

Hodges describes two non-negotiables as the content of the saving message:

1. Believe in the Jesus of the New Testament,
2. for the free gift of everlasting life (in other words, a life that can never be lost).

Having these two non-negotiables as the focus or "bullseye"² are the essential elements of the Focused Free Grace gospel.

These two non-negotiables are consistent with Jesus' conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well:

If you knew the gift of God [non-negotiable 2] and who [non-negotiable 1] it is who says to you, "Give Me a drink," you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water (John 4:10).

Jesus tells the Samaritan woman that she needs to know two things: 1) Who is speaking to her, Jesus the Giver; and 2) the gift of God, eternal life, which is the gift. With these two non-negotiables, the saving message taught throughout the Gospel of John (John 3:16; 5:24; 6:47; 11:25-27) may be summarized as, "Believe in Jesus for eternal life."

B. Flexible Free Grace Omits the Gift of Eternal Life as an Essential Part of the Saving Message

In Hodges' 2000 GES conference message, he was aware of an early form of Flexible Free Grace and warned about it:

Subsection number one is, "Believe that Jesus died on the cross."

In recent years, I have become aware of a way of presenting the gospel invitation that kind of bothers

¹ Zane C. Hodges, "How to Lead People to Christ – Part 2," Dreier2. February 11, 2009. Video, 10:20:00, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9u-fyysKh2Q&list=PLsku6QkQPewN0NOd7xOU_Bpisy2opE5EM&index=2, Accessed February 6, 2024.

² The author wants to credit Diane Boring with using the term *bullseye* in terms of the essential elements of the Focused Free Grace gospel.

me. I believe I have heard it from my earliest years, and I admit it really did not bother me for a long time. Now it does. I have heard people say this, “In order to be saved, you must believe that Jesus died on the cross.”

In the context of this discussion, I mean that this is their *summary* of the requirement of faith. This is *not just one item*, okay? You say, “How does a person get saved?”

They say, “Believe that Jesus died on the cross.” Whenever I hear that nowadays, I get extremely uncomfortable (emphasis added).³

Why was Hodges extremely uncomfortable with this presentation? Believing that Jesus died on the cross as the only essential element of the gospel leaves out non-negotiable 2, the gift of everlasting life.

For Flexible Free Grace adherents, believing in Jesus does not mean believing that He guarantees eternal life to all who believe in Him for it. Instead, they say that believing in Jesus means believing some other truth about Him. By dropping the gift of eternal life from the gospel message, the result is a message insufficient to save, even when believed.

Let us examine what Messrs. A, B, C, and D have written regarding whether eternal life is an essential part of the saving message of Jesus. In 2008, Mr. A wrote a journal article arguing that belief in eternal security is unnecessary for justification. He wrote:

Before a believer can serve with the proper motive, he must know that he is secure, *but a person does not need to know he is secure to be saved (justified)* (emphasis added).ⁱⁱ

Later in his article, Mr. A wrote:

But what about the content which is communicated? Some things are very clear: 1) sin separates us from God; 2) there needs to be a solution to the sin problem; 3) without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin; 4) the shed blood of Christ is the solution to the sin problem of man; 5) each person must believe in God’s provision for man’s sin in order to be justified.

³ Hodges, “How to Lead People to Christ – Part 2.”

But other things are not so clear. What does “to believe” mean, for example?ⁱⁱⁱ

According to Mr. A, you don’t need to know that you are secure or eternally secure in order to be saved or justified. Mr. A’s content to be communicated contains the cross but no mention of eternal life. Interestingly, Mr. A is also not clear on the meaning of “to believe.”⁴

In a 2017 book, Mr. A wrote:

The vast majority of Free Grace theologians and The Free Grace Alliance disassociated with Bob Wilkin due to his Grace Evangelical Society teaching *new doctrines we consider unorthodox* (emphasis added).^{iv}

What are these “new” and “unorthodox” doctrines of the Grace Evangelical Society (GES)? Mr. A quotes the following from GES’ doctrinal statement as being new and unorthodox:

[1] “Assurance is of the essence of believing in Jesus for everlasting life.”

[2] “To believe in Jesus (‘he who believes in Me has everlasting life’) is to be convinced that He guarantees everlasting life to all who simply believe in Him for it.”⁵ v

If everlasting life is new and unorthodox, then Mr. A’s gospel does not need to include the gift of everlasting life. When Mr. A’s gospel is believed, it does not need to bring assurance of everlasting life. For Mr. A, believing in Jesus must mean something other than believing in Jesus for everlasting life.

In a 2018 article, Mr. B expressed a view similar to Mr. A’s:

John’s gospel does not demand belief in eternal life “which can never be lost.”

and,

These statements of eternal security [John 5:24, 6:35, and 10:27-30] are given to assure those who have believed in Jesus Christ. They *are not the object, but the result of believing the saving message*” (emphasis added).^{vi}

4 For more on Mr. A’s views on the meaning of *believe* or *faith*, please see the subsection on “The Nature of the ‘Faith’ that Saves.”

⁵ “Affirmations of Belief.” FaithAlone.Org. Grace Evangelical Society, Accessed May 15, 2023. <https://faithalone.org/beliefs>.

According to Mr. B, eternal security is not the object or focus of one's belief. Flexible Free Grace people like to use the term *object of belief* as distinguished from the *result of belief*. *Object of faith* means the content that is believed. For Mr. B and other Flexible Free Grace proponents, everlasting life is not the object or content of belief. For them, everlasting life is the automatic result of believing some other truth about Jesus.

Mr. B concludes his article with:

The *doctrine of eternal security* is a wonderful and comforting assurance that those who have eternal life can never lose it, but to demand that an unsaved person grasp this in order to be saved is an *unnecessary addition to the saving gospel*. A person who believes in the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior who died for their sins and rose again is adequate for salvation (emphasis added).^{vii}

According to Mr. B, eternal security is an unnecessary addition to the saving gospel. Eternal life may be good to mention, but when it confuses or distracts, then there is flexibility to omit the issue of eternal life.

In 2020, Mr. C published a book charging GES and Zane Hodges with heresy. Mr. C wrote:

Yes, Jesus did promise us eternal life. But a *guarantee of eternal life as the object of faith is absent. Jesus as Guarantor of eternal life/security is absent*. The promise is never stated to be the object of our faith (emphasis added).^{viii}

Later in his book, Mr. C wrote:

[Apostle] John does *not* present Jesus as “the Guarantor of eternal life”—not in his gospel and not in his first epistle.”^{ix}

Again, later in his book, Mr. C wrote:

This statement [John 20:31] presents life only as the result, not belief in eternal life/security as the condition for justification. Hodges and Wilkin have made John 20:31 a conditional sentence by placing the *apodosis* [consequence] (eternal life) in the *protasis* [condition]

(belief in Jesus). According to their error, we must believe in the result as the condition for eternal life.”^x

According to Mr. C, eternal life is not part of the message to be believed, and Jesus does not call on us to believe in His promise of eternal life. Mr. A^{xi} and Mr. D^{xii} each gave Mr. C’s book a five-star review on Amazon.

Mr. D wrote in his own 2018 book:

The doctrine of the eternal security of the saints is, in my opinion, a fundamental belief that all *believers* must hold *if they are to walk in the fullness of resurrection life in Christ* (emphasis added).^{xiii}

Notice that Mr. D regards it as a possibility that one can be a believer without believing in eternal security. For Mr. D, eternal security is a Christian growth (discipleship) issue. Belief in eternal security is not necessary to become a believer, but necessary for a believer “to walk in the fullness of resurrection life.”

Messrs. A, B, C, and D view eternal life as an automatic result and not an essential part of the message to believe in Jesus for. They allow flexibility about whether to include eternal life when evangelizing.

This is, at heart, the difference between the Focused Free Grace and the Flexible Free Grace positions. For Focused Free Grace proponents, everlasting life must be part of the saving message. For Flexible Free Grace proponents, everlasting life is non-essential information.

This essential difference regarding the gospel directly impacts not only whether one is assured of eternal life when believing the gospel, but also many other areas related to the doctrine of salvation. It also determines who needs to be evangelized. Flexible Free Grace proponents do not need to evangelize those who believe in Lordship Salvation or works salvation since these people believe Jesus died on the cross for their sins and rose again. Focused Free Grace people witness to anyone who is unsure of whether, simply by faith in Jesus, he has everlasting life that cannot be lost.

IV. THE ESSENTIAL DIFFERENCE IN WHETHER ONE IS ASSURED OF ETERNAL LIFE WHEN BELIEVING THE SAVING MESSAGE

A. Focused Free Grace: Assurance of Eternal Life Is of the Essence of Saving Faith

If you are not assured of eternal life, then you are not believing what Jesus has promised. Recall Jesus' famous promise to Martha:

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11:25-26, NKJV)

If someone currently believes what Jesus said here, then that person must be sure he or she has eternal life. Such a person believes that when he or she dies, he or she shall live (resurrection). When he believes this, he receives eternal life, or a life that will never end. Assurance of eternal life is part and parcel of believing this promise. If someone is unsure of having eternal life, then that person is currently doubting what Jesus has promised.

Due to the content of the saving message of Jesus, assurance of eternal life will always be present when a person is believing the saving message. Therefore, for Focused Free Grace:

"Assurance of eternal life is of the essence of saving faith."

B. Flexible Free Grace: Assurance of Eternal Life Is Optional for Saving Faith

When there is flexibility about whether eternal life needs to be included in the gospel, assurance of eternal life becomes optional for saving faith. For Flexible Free Grace, assurance is not always present when a person believes in Jesus. You can see this expressed in the writings of Messrs. A, B, C, and D.

Mr. A wrote in his 2008 article:

The case for assurance being of the essence of saving faith is not exactly airtight, and the equation between

assurance of salvation and eternal security suffers from failure to launch.^{xiv}

Mr. B concurs with Mr. A on assurance and wrote in his 2018 article:

These statements of eternal security [John 5:24, 6:35, and 10:27-30] are given to assure those who have believed in Jesus Christ. They are not the object, but the result of believing the saving message (emphasis added).^{xv}

Likewise, Mr. C wrote in his 2020 book:

No Scripture states a person must have assurance of salvation in order to be justified.^{xvi}

and,

GES teaches a false gospel requiring assurance of eternal security.^{xvii}

Although in his 2018 book Mr. D writes about assurance accompanying saving faith, in this quote, he qualifies this assurance:

First, *some assurance* must always be part of faith. There must always be *some hope* where there is faith or belief in the heart (emphasis added).^{xviii}

Mr. D equates assurance with hope. In today's usage, *hope* denotes a desire, a wish, and a possibility, but not 100 percent certainty. Furthermore, Mr. D qualifies both assurance and hope with the word *some*. When a person only has "some assurance" or "some hope," that simply means that person is unsure.

The gospels of Messrs. A, B, C, and D do not have to include eternal life, so their gospels do not need to provide 100 percent assurance when believed. If a person does not need to be assured of an eternal salvation, then he or she does not need to be assured that Jesus has done anything at all for him or her.

For Flexible Free Grace, John 3:16 may be misunderstood as follows:

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him ~~should not perish but have~~ *does not need to know that he has everlasting life in order to have it* (original text struck through and added text in italics).

Flexible Free Grace conceives of people who are currently believing in Jesus—which results in eternal life—but who, at the same time, do not know for sure that they have eternal life. There are two explanations:

1. One can “believe in Jesus” but be unsure of whether he or she has eternal life, since *believe* is defined as an act of the will or a decision.

or,

2. *Believing in Jesus* means believing some Biblical truth about Jesus other than believing in Him for eternal life.

For many Flexible Free Grace people, the saving message may be summarized as:

Believe that Jesus is God and Savior who died on the cross for sins and rose again.

There is no need to mention or have any understanding of eternal life.

If Jesus’ deity, death, and resurrection are the bullseye or summary of the saving message, then the purpose statement in John 20:30-31 may be misunderstood as follows:

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 God ~~the Christ, the Son of God~~ and *that He died on the cross for sins and rose again*, and that believing you may have life in His name (original text struck through and added text in italics).

V. FUNDAMENTAL THEOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES AS A CONSEQUENCE OF THE TWO ESSENTIAL DIFFERENCES (ETERNAL LIFE AND ASSURANCE)

A. The Nature of the Faith That Saves

Many Flexible Free Grace proponents view assurance of eternal life as optional for saving faith because they understand *faith* to include more than the Focused Free Grace definition of *faith*: a persuasion or

conviction that some proposition is true. For Flexible Free Grace, *faith* adds an act of the will or a decision to this persuasion or conviction.

In a 2018 book, Mr. A wrote the following regarding what it means to be believing:

R.T. Kendall likes to speak of believing more as a “persuasion” than a “decision.” But I am not convinced that the word “decision” is wrong; yet it is important to clarify just what this decision entails. I would suggest that a decision for Christ means that someone decided (chose) to *trust Christ as Savior*.^{xix}

In this quote, Mr. A indicates that believing is more than a persuasion and includes a decision to “trust Christ as Savior.” How a person decides or chooses to trust Christ as Savior may be unclear, but in Mr. A’s testimony he describes his own experience:

I remember when I trusted Christ as my Savior. I had always believed Jesus, ever since I started going to church and could read and understand. We read the Apostles’ Creed every Sunday. *I believed Jesus was the Son of God, died for my sins, was buried, rose, went up to heaven. But I wasn’t even close to being a Christian, I assure you.*

It wasn’t until near the end of my senior year in high school that *I realized I was drowning in sin, couldn’t get out of it, and needed a Savior.* And so I was in the backseat of a Greyhound bus and *I asked Jesus to save me. Boom! I was born again. Didn’t know what it was.* Never heard Billy Graham. Never read a gospel tract. But, I knew something was different. All I wanted to do was read the Bible every day...

I am gonna say that I do not think the Bible talks about head faith and heart faith. Although, I do think there’s a validity to that concept. I think I had head faith, *I believed in Jesus long before I trusted Him*, and then it became heart faith (emphasis added).^{xx}

Nowhere in his testimony does Mr. A state that he believed in Jesus for eternal life. Mr. A claims that he believed in Jesus long before he trusted in Jesus. The difference between saving trust (heart faith) and

mere belief (head faith) was Mr. A's recognizing the need for a Savior, and then making a decision by asking Jesus to save him. Mr. A also says that he did not know what eternal life was, so there was no assurance of eternal life since you cannot be assured of what you do not know.

Mr. B also sees faith as involving the will. He wrote:

Objection #8: Free Grace teaches that faith is merely mental assent.

- Sometimes the offer of salvation emphasizes mental assent while at other times it [faith] *appeals to the will* also (emphasis added).^{xxi}

Mr. D also distinguishes between *belief* as persuasion and trust. He wrote in a 2018 book:

Faith involves believing assent to the facts of the Gospel and a personal reliance upon the person of Christ as a Savior from sin. It is a *persuasion that leads to trust* (emphasis added).^{xxii}

Mr. D likewise wrote in his five-star review of Mr. C's book:

Contrary to GES beliefs, orthodox Christianity teaches that to become a believer in Christ, one must *believe in* Jesus as God *and trust him* for the forgiveness of sin. GES denies both of these bedrock Christian beliefs and in that sense they are heretical (emphasis added).^{xxiii}

For Mr. D, faith equals persuasion plus a personal reliance, and trust is more than belief. When faith includes a decision or is an act of the will, you again have the possibility of saving faith without assurance of eternal life. You can ask Jesus to save you, or you can make a decision for Jesus without being persuaded that His promise of everlasting life to all who believe in Him is true.

If faith includes a decision or an act of the will, then the saving message of Jesus communicated to Martha in John 11:25-26 may be misunderstood as follows:

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who ~~believes in~~ *decides for* Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and ~~believes in~~ *decides for* Me shall never die. Do you ~~believe~~ *want to decide*

for this?” (original text struck through and added text in bold).

B. Fundamental Differences Regarding Repentance: Must We Desire Moral Reform in Order to Be Saved?

Regardless of a person’s definition of *repentance*, Focused Free Grace proponents reject the notion that a desire for moral reform is a condition for salvation. Even desiring moral reform is a work, and faith in Jesus does not include a desire for moral reform. Some Flexible Free Grace proponents inadvertently teach works salvation messages by including works as part of their definition of *repentance*, then making repentance a requirement for salvation. Mr. D views repentance as necessary for salvation and goes beyond the traditional Free Grace “change of mind”⁶ definition of repentance. In these quotes, when describing the repentance required for salvation, Mr. D includes works:

Certainly, as the writer above says, “at some level” there must be an acknowledgment of sin and a desire to be different...

However, there should be no objection to the requirement that at some level (known only to God) there is a desire to acknowledge one’s guilt before God and to *want a new way of life, which includes moral change*...

It [Repentance] is an expression of a *desire for a new way of life* (emphasis added).^{xxiv}

Mr. B also views repentance as a requirement for salvation, and typically defines repentance as a “change of mind.” But at times, when analyzing the Greek term for repentance, Mr. B shares a similar definition of repentance with Mr. D. Mr. B writes:

So the best translation of *metanoia* [repentance] would be a *change of heart*. It refers to a person’s *inner change of attitude and moral direction* (emphasis added).^{xxv}

In this quote, *repentance* is translated by Mr. B as a “change of heart” that requires an “inner change of attitude and moral direction.”

⁶ See Charles C. Ryrie, *So Great Salvation* (Wheaton, IL: SP Publications, 1989), 89-100, for the traditional Free Grace “change of mind” view of repentance.

So, for Mr. D or Mr. B, repentance required for salvation includes an “inner change of attitude and moral direction,” a “desire to be different,” “want[ing] a new way of life which includes moral change,” and a “desire for a new way of life.” These requirements are all works.

I see no essential difference between Mr. B’s and Mr. D’s views on repentance and the Lordship Salvation view of repentance. Mr. B, Mr. D, and lordship salvationists all view repentance as a requirement for salvation, and such repentance includes a willingness for moral change. With their views of repentance, the saving message in John 6:47 may be misunderstood as follows:

Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me
and repents by willing to make moral change has ever-
lasting life (added text in bold).

VI. OTHER THEOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES AS A CONSEQUENCE OF THE TWO ESSENTIAL DIFFERENCES (ETERNAL LIFE AND ASSURANCE)

A. Meaning of *Savior*

Focused Free Grace understands the term Savior to mean Jesus as the One who gives every believer in Jesus an unconditional, guaranteed, and everlasting salvation from the lake of fire. For Focused Free Grace, to believe in Jesus as Savior is to believe that Jesus has provided this unconditional, guaranteed, and everlasting salvation. A person is not believing in Jesus as Savior if he or she believes he or she needs to work either to be saved, to prove his or her salvation, or to stay saved.

Many Flexible Free Grace people typically summarize their gospel message as believing in Jesus as God and Savior. But one should ask, “What do they mean by *Savior*?”

In Flexible Free Grace, a person is still believing in Jesus as Savior if he or she believes in a Savior who provides a salvation that is conditioned on works, perseverance, or a salvation that may be lost. Many Flexible Free Gracers teach that one should believe in Jesus as “my” Savior or “my personal” Savior. However, the qualifiers of “my” or “my personal” to Savior are unnecessary, if assurance of everlasting life is optional for saving faith. If I am unsure of my salvation, then how am

I believing that Jesus is “my” Savior or “my personal” Savior? If assurance is optional for saving faith, then there is no need for the words “my” or “my personal.”

To get eternal life under Flexible Free Grace, a person just needs to believe that Jesus is the Savior of those for whom He died, which does not have to include oneself.

B. Are There Multiple Saving Messages?

Focused Free Grace has a single saving message: “Believe in the Jesus of the New Testament for everlasting life.” However, is Jesus’ deity, death, and resurrection the exclusive saving message of Flexible Free Grace? No.

Some Flexible Free Grace proponents support multiple saving messages. At my previous home church, a Flexible Free Grace teacher brought up the fact that he did not always mention eternal life when evangelizing. He explained his view that a person can receive eternal life unknowingly by believing any of the following messages:

1. Jesus is sent by God.
2. Jesus died on the cross for sins and rose again.
3. Jesus is coming again.

This Flexible Free Grace teacher stressed multiple times that if a person believes Jesus has been sent by God, but knows nothing about eternal life, that person still gets eternal life.

In these quotes, Mr. B advocates for a similar saving message: “Jesus has been sent by God:”

The claim that John’s text and Jesus’ words demand *belief in eternal security is a myopic view of salvation* in this Gospel where salvation is addressed in its many aspects. From the overwhelming frequency of passages where Jesus’ identity must be accepted or believed, one could argue that *who Jesus is is the focus of the saving message in John—He is the One sent from God* (emphasis added).^{xxvi}

and,

In John 5:24 the *object of belief is “Him who sent Me”* and the result is “eternal life” (emphasis added).^{xxvii}

According to Mr. B, the focus of the saving message in the Gospel of John is that “Jesus is the One sent by God,” that John 5:24 teaches that the object of one’s belief is “God who sent Jesus,” and that the result of believing this truth is “eternal life.” In his view, eternal life is not the object or focus of belief, but simply a result that may be unknown to someone who believes Jesus is sent from God.

However, believing only that Jesus has been sent from God does not result in one being born again. Recall Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus in John 3, where—although Nicodemus recognizes Jesus as a teacher who comes from God (John 3:2)—he still needs to be born again (John 3:7) and to believe in Jesus for everlasting life as Jesus says in John 3:16.⁷

If the saving message is simply believing that Jesus has been sent by God, then John 5:24 may be misunderstood in this manner:

Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me, *unknowingly* has everlasting life, and *unknowingly* shall not come into judgment, but *unknowingly* has passed from death into life (added text in bold).

Mr. A also criticizes what he considers the narrowness of those who limit the gospel to a message of eternal security and assurance of eternal life as the essence of saving faith. He writes in his 2008 article:

The case for assurance being of the essence of saving faith is not exactly airtight, and the equation between assurance of salvation and eternal security suffers from failure to launch. It seems to me that when we define the limits of the gospel so narrowly, we are in danger of limiting God Himself. What are we going to do with the gospel of Revelation 14:6 [sic 14:6-7], which mentions neither eternal life nor Christ, yet it is called the “everlasting gospel”? What are we going to do with the sinner who was “justified” (perfect tense) in Luke 18 when he merely cried out for God to be merciful to him?^{2xxviii}

In this quote, the reader is challenged with the claim that something must be done about the “everlasting gospel” in Rev 14:6-7 and the sinner who was justified in Luke 18:13.

⁷ The author wants to credit Phillippe Sterling with providing this insight regarding Nicodemus.

What is the “everlasting gospel” in Rev 14:7?

Fear God and give glory to Him, for the hour of His judgment has come; and worship Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and springs of water (Rev 14:7, NKJV).

How was the sinner justified in Luke 18:13? By pleading:

“God, be merciful to me a sinner” (Luke 18:13, NKJV).

The messages in Rev 14:7 and Luke 18:13 are different from the saving message of “Believe in Jesus for eternal life.” Mr. A recognizes these as different messages, so he concludes his 2008 article with the following:

To be sure, the message of eternal security brings the point of Christ’s finished work home, and there are many who have come to initial saving faith through that wonderful message. Coming back to where we began, I truly believe that the best way to present the gospel is with the issue of assurance. *But is it the only way?* There are too many unprovable assumptions and arguments from silence to persuade me that belief in eternal security is a *sine qua non* [essential condition] of justification (emphasis added).^{xxix}

Although Mr. A may believe that the best way to present the gospel includes eternal security and assurance, he does not believe that is the only way and the only gospel. Revelation 14:6-7 and Luke 18:13 are potential evangelistic passages and alternative messages for salvation.

For some Flexible Free Grace teachers, multiple saving messages are a possibility. According to them, a person can—without believing in Jesus for eternal life—unknowingly receive eternal life as the result of believing any of the following messages or performing any of the following actions:

- Jesus is God, died on the cross, and rose again.
- Jesus has been sent by God.
- Fear God, give glory to Him, and worship Him.
- Ask God for mercy as a sinner.

C. Flexible Free Grace: Church History Proves That Works Salvation Messages Are Saving Messages

A person cannot believe in Jesus for everlasting life and at the same time believe in the need to work for his or her salvation. For this reason, Focused Free Grace considers works salvation messages and Lordship Salvation messages to be non-saving messages. A person cannot believe a works salvation message or a Lordship Salvation message and at the same time believe in Jesus for everlasting life.

When a person does not believe in eternal security, then he or she is not believing in Jesus for eternal life. It is apparent when you speak with individuals who reject or doubt eternal security that works are a condition for their receiving eternal life. In their minds, works are necessary either to become saved, to prove their salvation, or to stay saved. However, if eternal security is an unnecessary addition to the gospel, as Flexible Free Grace teaches, then works salvation messages become acceptable saving messages.

Mr. A views the works salvation messages recorded in church history from AD 100 to AD 1500 as saving messages, since church history during that period has no record of individuals believing in Jesus for eternal life and the assurance that comes from believing that message. Mr. A writes in his 2008 article:

It seems that the postapostolic church saw water baptism as the laver of regeneration that covered all sins leading up to water baptism. Postbaptismal sins were another question. They were to be handled by confession, contrition, and penance. Improper dealing with postbaptismal sins led to loss of salvation (emphasis added).^{xxx}

After describing the views of the postapostolic church that required works for salvation (baptism, confession, contrition, and penance), Mr. A provides his conclusion that these individuals who believed works salvation messages were saved individuals:

If God is building His church and the gates of hell cannot prevail against it, then there had to be a witness from A.D. 100 to A.D. 1500. In other words, there had to be genuine born-again people living throughout this era. But we have no written record of anyone teaching forgiveness of postbaptismal sins once and for all at the

point of faith in Christ. *Hence, no one taught eternal security or assurance of salvation* (emphasis added).^{xxxi}

Mr. A argues that works salvation messages involving baptism, confession, contrition, and penance are saving messages because, based on church history, these were the only gospels being taught from AD 100–1500. Since there are always believers in every age, then according to Mr. A, these works salvation messages are saving because no message of “believe in Jesus for everlasting life” was being proclaimed.

Mr. C agrees with Mr. A regarding this view of church history and the proclamation solely of works-salvation messages during this period:

[Mr. A] astutely pointed out that without this forensic justification (developed about 1530), *no person could have ever believed in eternal security before 1530*. The GES heresy requires faith in eternal security for justification. *Therefore, according to the GES heresy, not a single Christian existed from AD 100 to about 1530* (emphasis added).^{xxxii}

Mr. C also wrote the following regarding contemporary works salvation messages:

But where does Scripture state *adding good works* (that God produces in us) negates faith in who Jesus is for salvation? It is wrong, but *it does not negate faith* in Jesus Christ as God and Savior for justification.

In my opinion, this is a typical evangelical error: it is not limited to Wilkin and his GES. Evangelicals want to oust some Christians as “true Christians” because they add works for final salvation. *Roman Catholics, Calvinists, Ariminians and other Protestants all add works* (emphasis added).^{xxxiii}

Later, on the same page, Mr. C continues with:

Therefore, if all Roman Catholics are non-Christians, then so are all other Protestants (except those few believing in eternal security without works). That is the problem with “faith alone in Christ alone” as a requirement for justification. I believe “faith alone in Christ alone” to be a true statement. *But it does not mean that any addition of works nullifies a person’s faith*

in Jesus Christ as God and Savior from sin for justification (emphasis added).^{xxxiv}

For Mr. C, Roman Catholics, Calvinists, Ariminians, and other Protestants who believe that works are required for salvation still believe the gospel since they all believe that Jesus is God and Savior. However, these groups do not teach that one must believe in Jesus for everlasting life. It is impossible to believe in Jesus for everlasting life and at the same time believe that one needs to work for salvation or to prove or maintain one's salvation.

To justify dropping eternal security from the gospel, both Messrs. A and C cite church history as proof that no one believed in Jesus for eternal security from AD 100–1500. Mr. A and Mr. C conveniently ignore the fact that the message in the Gospel of John would have been heard during this period of church history,⁸ and that anyone who—at any time during his life—hears and believes the saving message of Jesus has everlasting life. God knows and never forgets who has believed, even when there is no record of it in church history.

D. Role of the Gospel of John in Evangelism

Since the Gospel of John makes it very clear that one needs to believe in Jesus for the gift of eternal life, Messrs. A, B, and C downplay the role of the Gospel of John in evangelism. In this quote, Mr. A claims that other books of the Bible were also written to unbelievers:

Thus, it is *tenuous at best* to declare categorically that the *Gospel of John is the only New Testament book written for unbelievers* and therefore the final word in the New Testament on evangelism (emphasis added).^{xxxv}

Mr. B concurs with Mr. A by calling it an “unprovable assumption” that the Gospel of John is the sole book written to unbelievers. At times he even questions whether the Gospel of John has an evangelistic purpose. He writes the following:

⁸ For evidence that the Gospel of John was heard during AD 100–1500, see John H. Niemelä, “Pre-Reformation Belief in Eternal Security: The Word of Faith We Preach Is Near (Romans 10:8),” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 28 (Spring 2015): 63–80; and John H. Niemelä, “Was the Gospel Lost Until the Reformation?” *Grace in Focus*, July 1, 2015. See <https://faithal-one.org/grace-in-focus-articles/gospel-lost-until-reformation/>. Accessed Jul 25, 2023.

The assumption is made that John is the only Bible book written to tell us how to be saved, and eternal life is the exclusive focus of that message...

If John writes only to unbelievers about how to be saved, then chapters 13–17 would not fit that purpose...

We would expect John to express his purpose in the introduction to the book, as he does in 1 John 1:3-4. If so, then John 1:4-5 tells us that he is writing to present Jesus Christ as the light and life of men...

While John's Gospel certainly has a purpose of bringing people to salvation, it is an *unprovable assumption* that he wrote the only book that contains an evangelistic purpose (emphasis added).^{xxxvi}

Mr. C agrees with Mr. B and questions John's stated purpose of evangelism by arguing that John chapters 13–17 (Jesus' final discourse) do not fit with an evangelistic purpose.⁹ He writes:

Why is John 13–17 present if the purpose of John's gospel is evangelism?^{xxxvii}

Messrs. A and B question whether other books of the Bible were written for evangelism and whether the entire book of John is for evangelism. However, these quotations from Messrs. A, B, and C directly contradict the clearly stated purpose of the Gospel of John in John 20:30-31:

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 (emphasis added).

Notice that the apostle John has chosen the signs written in his book—not just portions of his book, but the entire book, even the signs in John 13–17—to lead people to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. Based on John 11:25-27, to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, is to believe that Jesus guarantees eternal life to all who believe in Him for it.

⁹ For the purpose of John 13–17, see Zane Hodges, "Introducing John's Gospel: In the Upper Room with Jesus the Christ, Part 1 of 2," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 40 (Spring 2008): 29-44; and Zane Hodges, "Introducing John's Gospel: Miraculous Signs and Literary Structure, Part 2 of 2," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 41 (Autumn 2008): 15-27.

No other book in the Bible has a stated purpose of evangelism. Shockingly, those who profess to be Free Grace would seek to downplay the Gospel of John's role in evangelism. The Gospel of John is simply our best tool for making the saving message clear to unbelievers because that is God's intended purpose for the Gospel of John.

VII. CONCLUSION

There are two essentially different views of Free Grace. For Focused Free Grace: (1) Believing in Jesus for everlasting life is an essential component of the saving message; and (2) One who is believing in Jesus for everlasting life knows for sure that he has everlasting life (in other words, assurance is of the essence of saving faith). These are the two pillars—the foundational elements—of Focused Free Grace Theology. These are what set Focused Free Grace Theology apart from any other system of theology that claim to be Free Grace. Without (1) belief in Jesus for everlasting life and (2) the assurance of everlasting life as the essence of saving faith, you no longer have a theology that is Focused Free Grace.

In contrast, for Flexible Free Grace: (1) Believing in Jesus for everlasting life is an unnecessary addition to the saving message; and (2) A person can believe in Jesus without knowing for sure that he or she has everlasting life (in other words assurance is optional for saving faith).

A word of caution is needed. While the offer of eternal life and assurance are *optional* for Flexible Free Grace proponents, that does not mean they will never present eternal life or include assurance in their gospel presentations. Flexible Free Grace will at times sound just like Focused Free Grace in its teaching. Flexible Free Grace may include eternal life when the audience is receptive but leave out eternal life and assurance when such teachings become stumbling blocks to having one believe in Jesus' deity, death, and resurrection or in pressing for an act of the will or a "decision for Jesus."

From these essential differences in (1) the content of the saving message and (2) assurance, we have two vastly different systems of Free Grace Theology. They are summarized in the chart below:

	Focused Free Grace	Flexible Free Grace
Eternal Life (Eternal Security) in the Gospel Message	Essential	Optional
Eternal Security and Evangelism	Salvation issue	Discipleship issue
Assurance of Eternal Life	Of the essence of saving faith	Optional for saving faith
Eternal Life	Object (content) and result of saving faith	Result of saving faith; not necessarily the object (content) of saving faith
Definition of Faith / Believe	Persuasion or conviction of truth	For some, includes an act of the will or a decision
Repentance as Desire for Moral Reform	Never required for salvation	For some, required for salvation
Jesus as Savior	Eternal and irrevocable salvation for me	Temporary or probationary salvation for someone (not necessarily me)
Number of Saving Messages	One: “Believe in Jesus for everlasting life”	For some, multiple
Works Salvation / Lordship Salvation messages	Non-Saving	Saving
Gospel of John for Evangelism	Exclusive book	Non-exclusive book

For both believers and unbelievers, the differences between Focused Free Grace and Flexible Free Grace are vast, and the Bible issues a warning about denying Jesus’ saving message (Jesus’ guarantee of everlasting life to all who believe in Him). In 1 John 2:22, the apostle John writes:

Who is a liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ?
He is antichrist who denies the Father and the Son.

Recall from John 11:25-27 that to believe that Jesus is the *Christ* is to believe that Jesus guarantees everlasting life to every believer in Him. The apostle John identifies those who deny the saving message that Jesus is the Christ as “liars” and “antichrists,” so a departure from this message is serious and grave.

There have been increasing calls for unity within the Free Grace movement despite theological differences regarding the saving message of Jesus. Those who call for unity typically cite the doctrinal differences described in this article as minor, mere details, or inconsequential. Given the theological differences described, is Flexible Free Grace compatible with continuing joint ministry with a Focused Free Grace ministry like GES?

For that answer, please consider the verse from Amos 3:3.¹⁰ Although the context is the Lord and the nation of Israel, this author believes it is applicable to the deep theological differences between Focused and Flexible Free Grace:

“Can two walk together, except they be agreed?”

¹⁰ This author wants to credit Bob Bryant with the application of this verse in the context of joint ministry.

ENDNOTES

- i Mr. A = David Anderson; Mr. B = Charlie Bing; Mr. C = Ken Wilson; and Mr. D = Joseph Dillow.
- ii David Anderson, "Is Belief in Eternal Security Necessary for Justification?" *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal* 13 (Spring 2008): 54.
- iii Ibid., 56.
- iv David R. Anderson, "The Faith that Saves," *A Defense of Free Grace Theology*, ed. Fred Chay (Grace Theology Press, 2017), 81-82.
- v Ibid., 82.
- vi Charlie Bing, "Does John's Gospel Demand Belief in Eternal Security for Salvation?" *GraceNotes* No. 79 (2018). Accessed May 15, 2023. See <https://www.gracelife.org/resources/gracenotes/?id=79&lang=eng>
- vii Ibid.
- viii Kenneth Wilson, *Heresy of the Grace Evangelical Society: Become a Christian without Faith in Jesus as God and Savior* (Montgomery, TX: Regula Fidei Press, 2020), Kindle edition, 58.
- ix Ibid.
- x Ibid., 71.
- xi David Anderson, Amazon review of Wilson's "Heresy of the Grace Evangelical Society," 5 stars - *Oxford Scholar Confronts the Gospel of the Grace Evangelical Society*, September 22, 2021. Accessed May 15, 2023, See <https://www.amazon.com/Heresy-Grace-Evangelical-Society-Christian/dp/B08RRDTFFH>.
- xii Joseph C. Dillow, Amazon review of Wilson's "Heresy of the Grace Evangelical Society," 5 stars – *Some reviews of Dr. Wilson's book are inaccurate*, September 17, 2021. Accessed May 16, 2023, See <https://www.amazon.com/Heresy-Grace-Evangelical-Society-Christian/dp/B08RRDTFFH>.
- xiii Joseph Dillow, *Final Destiny: The Future Reign of the Servant Kings* (Woodlands, TX: Grace Theology Press, 2018), Kindle edition, 627.
- xiv Anderson, "Is Belief in Eternal Security Necessary for Justification?" 59.
- xv Bing, "Does John's Gospel Demand Belief in Eternal Security for Salvation?"
- xvi Wilson, *Heresy of the Grace Evangelical Society*, 18.
- xvii Ibid., 118.
- xviii Dillow, *Final Destiny*, 470.
- xix David Anderson, *Free Grace Soteriology*, (Woodlands, TX: Grace Theology Press, 2018), Kindle edition, 178.
- xx David Anderson, "2021 FGA Conference – Sandra Glahn," Free Grace Alliance.Video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vbEMO4AzwWM>, 0:0:37-0:1:20, 0:1:45-0:2:02. Accessed May 15, 2023.
- xxi Charlie Bing, "Answering Common Objections to Free Grace, Part 2," *GraceNotes* No. 91 (2021). Accessed May 15, 2023. See <https://www.gracelife.org/resources/gracenotes/?id=91&lang=eng>

xxii Dillow, *Final Destiny*, 699.

xxiii Dillow, Amazon review of Wilson's "Heresy of the Grace Evangelical Society."

xxiv Dillow, *Final Destiny*, 54.

xxv Charlie Bing, "Repentance: What's in a Word," *GraceNotes* No. 22 (2004). Accessed May 15, 2023. See <https://www.gracelife.org/resources/gracenotes/?id=22&lang=eng>.

xxvi Bing, "Does John's Gospel Demand Belief in Eternal Security for Salvation?"

xxvii Ibid.

xxviii Anderson, "Is Belief in Eternal Security Necessary for Justification," 59.

xxix Ibid.

xxx Ibid., 48.

xxxi Ibid., 49.

xxxii Wilson, *Heresy of the Grace Evangelical Society*, 126.

xxxiii Ibid., 102.

xxxiv Ibid.

xxxv Anderson, "Is Belief in Eternal Security Necessary for Justification?," 51.

xxxvi Bing, "Does John's Gospel Demand Belief in Eternal Security for Salvation?"

xxxvii Wilson, *Heresy of the Grace Evangelical Society*, 78.

WILL THOSE WHO NEVER HEARD GET A SECOND CHANCE?

JOHN CLAEYS

I. INTRODUCTION

“Will those who never heard get a second chance to be saved?” is a legitimate theological question that needs to be answered, for it inherently relates to the understanding of the gospel (the good news of eternal salvation). While this article seeks to answer this question, there lies, behind the theological question, a haunting moral question that is often presented as a stumbling block to the gospel. The moral question is: “How could a good and loving God condemn to hell someone who has never heard the gospel?” We will begin with this second (moral) question—and how many theologians answer it—and then proceed to answer the first (theological) question.

A. The Answer Based on Calvinism

For many Calvinists, how a good and loving God could condemn to hell someone who has never heard the gospel is an irrelevant question.¹ After all, their view is that God brings about faith in the elect because He has already chosen to save them on some other basis, external to the individuals involved.² So God, from eternity past, has elected some to spend eternity with Him and the rest to spend eternity in hell, away from His presence. Thus, for Calvinists, this is a question that need not, or cannot, be answered, since one’s eternal destiny rests fully in

1 Calvinists, for this article, are those who embrace Reformed theology. See the next footnote for further elaboration.

2 More specifically, they believe that at some point in time, God regenerates those He has elected from all eternity past, then grants them faith so they can believe the gospel. For example: “I think there are many texts that teach that the new birth precedes and brings about faith—in other words, texts that teach that the new birth, or regeneration, is the gracious, free, sovereign work of God prior to our new life in Christ, which creates that life and brings about faith.” (John Piper, “Does Faith Cause Regeneration?” *Desiring God*, Episode 1774, Apr 25, 2022, <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/does-faith-cause-regeneration>. Accessed Sep 3, 2023.) Also, “Regeneration precedes faith. That is, the power of faith, the power of believing, is a result not of an act of our will independently, but it is the fruit of God’s sovereign act of changing the disposition of our hearts and giving to us the gift of faith” (R. C. Sproul, “Regeneration Precedes Faith,” *Ligonier.org*, Oct 9, 2019, <https://www.ligonier.org/posts/regeneration-precedes-faith>. Accessed Sep 3, 2023).

the determination of God. Calvinists believe it is therefore fruitless to deal with this question.

B. The Answer Based on General Revelation

For theologians such as Millard Erickson, Clark Pinnock, et al., salvation is only found through Jesus Christ; however, some who have never heard of Him may be saved. This understanding is “based on a belief in the efficacy of general revelation for a salvific relationship to God.”³ Erickson cites OT saints who were saved without hearing the name of Jesus.⁴ Pinnock states: “It is my opinion that, whereas objective salvation is clear (i.e., through Christ alone—Jn 14:6), subjective salvation is not so straightforward (i.e., how one is saved by Christ).”⁵ Thus, this view rests upon an objective/subjective salvation.

According to this view, while God mandates that people are eternally saved by believing in Jesus Christ, those who never hear His name could be eternally saved by coming to believe in God through general revelation (general truths that can be known about God through nature).⁶ However, this view would seem to discourage evangelism, as a person may be better off not hearing the name of Jesus—which he or she may reject, to the detriment of his or her eternal state—since the subjective nature of general revelation seems to provide salvation simply by a person acknowledging the existence of God.

C. The Answer Based on Condemnation for Sin

There is a third way Christian theologians answer the question: “How could a good and loving God condemn to hell someone who has never heard the gospel?” According to this group, the answer is: “Salvation is only possible through faith in Jesus—in this life only;

³ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2013), 123.

⁴ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 138. Clark, Pinnock, and John Stott are also examples of inclusivists. Pinnock states: “It is my opinion that, whereas objective salvation is clear (i.e., through Christ alone—John 14:6), subjective salvation is not so straightforward (i.e., how one is saved by Christ).” (Clark H. Pinnock, “An Inclusivist View,” in *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, eds. Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995], 157–68).

⁵ “‘Misgivings’ and ‘Openness’: A Dialogue on Inclusivism Between R. Douglas Geivett and Clark Pinnock,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* (Summer 1998): 34.

⁶ Verses such as Ps 19:1 (“The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork.”) and Rom 1:20 (“For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse.”) are used to promote general revelation.

however, condemnation is based on our sin.” In *Faith Comes by Hearing*, Christopher Morgan and Robert Peterson write:

How could it be fair and just for those who have never even had a chance to hear the gospel, which is necessary for salvation, to be condemned to hell? The question sounds powerful, but behind it lie faulty assumptions. The first mistaken assumption is that our condemnation is based on a rejection of the gospel. Scripture teaches that our condemnation is based on the fact that we are sinners, not because at some point in time we rejected the gospel.⁷

At first, that may sound reasonable, except that this view is not Biblically correct. It conflicts with proclamations such as: “The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29); “And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world” (1 John 2:2). The point of these verses is that Jesus has already made propitiation for the sins of the entire world. This means that eternal life is only received by believing Jesus for it, and condemnation is based only on *not* believing Jesus for eternal life. Jesus made that declaration in John 3:18: “He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.”

That could not be stated any more clearly. Therefore, this view is incorrect. Since Jesus has already made the propitiation for sin on behalf of all humanity, condemnation does not come because of one’s sins, but because of one’s unbelief in Jesus Christ.

⁷ Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, *Faith Comes by Hearing* (Westmont, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 241. A similar way to answer this question is: “So when people ask what happens to the innocent guy in Africa who dies without ever hearing the gospel, I would say, beyond a shadow of a doubt, he goes to heaven. However, before you begin to label me a heretic, consider: If there is an innocent guy in Africa who has never heard the gospel, then he doesn’t need a Savior. He hasn’t done anything wrong, so why would he be separated from God? But that’s precisely the problem: There is no innocent guy in Africa or Asia. Every one of us has rejected the knowledge of God, so we are not innocent.” East-West Staff, “What Happens to Someone Who Never Hears the Gospel?” <https://blog.eastwest.org/what-happens-to-someone-who-never-hears-the-gospel/>. Accessed Mar 18, 2023.

D. The Answer Based on Obtaining Salvation after Death

There are others, even some in the Free Grace community, who would answer the question in this way: “Salvation is only possible through faith in Jesus, but people may obtain salvation after death.” Since the rest of this article will refute that answer, suffice it to say that I believe this view is also Biblically incorrect.

E. The Answer Based on Not Obtaining Salvation After Death

There is one Biblically correct response to the question: “How could a good and loving God condemn to hell someone who has never heard the gospel?” The correct response is: “Eternal salvation is only possible through faith in Jesus, and no one will obtain salvation after death. If one does not believe in Jesus for eternal life prior to death, it means that the individual was not open to the gospel and never will be.”⁸ The rest of this article will flesh out this view.

II. FOR THOSE WHO ARE OPEN, GOD PROVIDES EVERY OPPORTUNITY TO RECEIVE HIS SALVATION

A. God Desires All Men to Be Saved (1 Tim 2:4)

Regarding this discussion, 1 Tim 2:3b-4 presents this critical revelation: “God our Savior...desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” If God truly “desires all men to be saved,” then certainly God will afford every opportunity for those open to the gospel to hear the saving message to believe in Jesus for eternal life.

B. God Made His Salvation Incredibly Easy to Receive

Because God desires all men to be saved, He made His salvation incredibly easy to receive. As you know, He sent His own Son, Jesus, into this world to provide that salvation for us. Jesus lived a perfect life and then offered the perfect sacrifice on behalf of all people. Just before He died, Jesus proclaimed, “It is finished!” (John 19:30). He had done

⁸ There is one exception to this statement: I understand children who die under the “age of accountability” will have the opportunity in the millennial kingdom to believe in Jesus. See John Clayes, *A New World Coming*, 136-45 for a discussion of this subject. Thus, this statement references any adult who does not believe the gospel prior to death.

everything necessary to satisfy God's perfect standards. At His death, Jesus had made propitiation for the sins of the entire world (John 1:29; 1 John 2:2).⁹ Therefore, for people everywhere (and in every epoch) to receive God's salvation, all that remains is to believe Jesus for His promise of eternal life (John 3:16-18; 6:47; 11:25-26; 1 Tim 1:16). It could not be simpler or easier for anyone, regardless of who they are or what they have done, to receive God's salvation. This leads us to our next point.

C. Those Open to God's Salvation Will Hear and Believe

1. Examples from the OT

In giving Solomon directions for building the temple of God, King David said by the Holy Spirit: "For the LORD searches all hearts and understands all the intent of the thoughts. If you seek Him, He will be found by you..." (1 Chron 28:9).¹⁰ Though directed specifically to Solomon at the time, this is also a principle we see throughout Scripture. Those who seek God will be found by Him. This includes, as we will see in examples that follow, unbelievers who seek God.

Moses emphasizes this same point in another dramatically important highlight in Israel's history. In preparing the Israelites to go into the Promised Land, Moses, as a prophet, foretold to his Jewish brethren that, due to their disobedience against the Lord, He would eventually drive them out of the land (of Israel) and into various nations where they would serve idols, further departing from the Lord God. However, as a ray of hope, Moses also revealed this: "But from there you will seek the LORD your God, and you will find Him if you seek Him with all your heart and with all your soul" (Deut 4:29). Thus, even after extreme rebellion, Jews who sincerely seek God "will find Him."

The promise of Deut 4:29 will ultimately be fulfilled in the future toward the end of the seven-year Tribulation period; there is little (or no) indication that Jews who returned to the land following the

⁹ This means Jesus satisfied God's demand regarding sin for *all* people.

¹⁰ First Chronicles 28:12 states that David had received all the plans for building the temple "by the Spirit." However, it is most likely that not only the plans regarding the temple, but also David's instruction to, and exhortation of, the one (Solomon) who would be leading this immense project, came by the Spirit. In addition, we know David was also a prophet who spoke by the Holy Spirit (cf. Matt 22:42-44; Acts 1:16; 2:25-30), and it is most probable that, in giving these critical instructions regarding the all-important temple, David had not only received these directions from the Spirit, but also relayed them as well as other essential revelation (such as the one to Solomon mentioned above).

reinstitution of the State of Israel in 1948 were, en masse, in a right (justified) relationship with God or that they came to “know God” (cf. John 17:3) following their return to the land. However, toward the end of the Tribulation there will be a mass fulfillment of Deut 4:29, during which “all Israel will be saved” (Rom 11:26). Moses is therefore predicting a time when unbelieving Jews will seek the Lord, and they will find Him.

2. Examples from the NT

In Matthew 13, after Jesus had spoken to the multitudes in parables, the disciples asked: “Why do You speak to them in parables?” Jesus answered their inquiry by saying, “Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 13:11). Jesus went on to explain that He spoke in parables to the crowd because, “to them it has not been given...I speak to them in parables, because ‘seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand’” (Matt 13:13-15).

Jesus gave insight to His disciples because they openly sought the truth. This is demonstrated in the immediate context by their coming to Jesus and asking for the truth; however, we do not see that openness demonstrated by those in the crowd. In fact, in quoting from Isaiah 6, Jesus affirmed that those in the crowd were not open to the truth; therefore, they were not given it, at least not in terms they could understand.

An even clearer illustration of this point—that those open to God’s salvation will hear and believe—is found in John 6:45: “Therefore everyone who hears and has learned from the Father comes to Me.” While “comes to Me” in this context refers to believing in Jesus for eternal life,¹¹ “hears and has learned” refers to something occurring before believing. Jesus uses “hear(s)” elsewhere, such as in Revelation (penned by the same author who wrote the Gospel of John) to refer to one who is open to the truth.¹² Therefore, Jesus reveals in John 6:45

¹¹ See John 6:35, where Jesus announces: “He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst.” Here, Jesus is presenting synonymous parallelism in which the second half of the statement is a reiteration of the first half. That means that “comes to Me” has the same meaning as “believes in Me.” See Robert N. Wilkin, *Is Calvinism Biblical?* (Denton, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2017), 25, where Wilkin states that even “Calvinists agree that coming to Jesus in John 6:35 refers to believing in Him” and then cites some (such as John MacArthur and John Piper) who agree with that understanding.

¹² Examples include Rev 2:7, 11, 17; 3:6, 13, 22.

that those who are open—who hear and who learn from the Father—are those who will believe in Jesus for eternal life.

Cornelius, in Acts 10, is a classic example of the point that those who are open to God's salvation will hear the gospel and will then believe in Jesus for eternal life. In Acts 10, an angel appeared to Cornelius and revealed: "Your prayers and your alms have come up for a memorial before God" (Acts 10:4). The angel then told Cornelius: "Send men to Joppa, and call for Simon whose surname is Peter, who will tell you words by which you and all your household will be saved" (Acts 11:13b-14). Cornelius open-heartedly sought the Lord, so the Lord provided for Cornelius to hear the gospel (by sending Peter to him), at which point he believed (Acts 10:34-48; 11:15-18).

Finally, the assertion I have been making is included in Paul's address at the Areopagus in Athens, found in Acts 17. In verses 26-27, Paul proclaimed: "And He [God] has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, so that they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us."

Regarding these verses, Josh McDowell commented: "Scripture appears to be saying that we are each ordained by God to be born *exactly* in the moment of history that gives us the opportunity to find Him. Some overlook this opportunity, some disregard it, and others eventually [believe in Jesus]."¹³ This means that those open to God's salvation will find God by hearing the good news of eternal life, and then believe in Him for that life. However...

D. Those Who Do Not Hear of God's Salvation Are Those Who Are Not Open to It

We touched on this point earlier, but it is worth revisiting for the sake of emphasis. Once again, when Jesus addressed a multitude in Matthew 13, His disciples approached Him and asked:

¹³ Josh McDowell, "What Happens to People Who Die Without Hearing the Gospel?" https://www.josh.org/what-happens-die-without-hearing-the-gospel/?mwm_id=496610987446&utm_campaign=MW_googlegrant&mwm_id=496610987446&gclid=Cj0KCQjwwtWgBhDhARIsAEMcxeAQmXjli0lXFZC5RY3SrSXV3QxnzQ85s_TLBKkZku3tBy2Tqe9F-0AaAnD9EALw_wcB. Accessed Mar 18, 2023. For purposes of clarification, the quote has been modified from "wholeheartedly accept Him" to "believe in Jesus."

“Why do You speak to them [the multitude] in parables?” Jesus then answered: “Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given...I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand...For the hearts of this people have grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, and their eyes they have closed” (Matt 13:10-15).

Some who are not open to the gospel *do hear* the good news of eternal life through faith in Jesus. However, others who are not open *will not hear* the gospel. This follows God’s sage advice in Prov 9:7-8: “He who corrects a scoffer gets shame for himself...Do not correct a scoffer, lest he hate you; rebuke a wise man, and he will love you.” A scoffer is one who is not open to God’s truth, particularly the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Therefore, all who are open to the gospel of Jesus will eventually (in God’s perfect timing) hear the good news and believe in Jesus for eternal life. It therefore follows that if people die without hearing the gospel, it is because they were not open to it. They are scoffers who may never hear the clear presentation of the promise of eternal life given to anyone who believes Jesus for it.¹⁴

III. THE BIBLE GIVES NO EXAMPLE OF AN UNBELIEVER BELIEVING IN JESUS AFTER DEATH

The absence of even one example in Scripture, or even one Biblical statement, regarding someone believing in Jesus following death, appears to eliminate the viewpoint that some may believe in Jesus after death. How can one push that view if no Biblical examples and no verses in Scripture support it?

¹⁴ If God allows a scoffer (one not open to the gospel) *not* to hear the gospel, this determination is a merciful provision by God. The more one rejects a clear presentation or demonstration of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the greater will be his or her judgment in the future. This is illustrated in Luke 10 in Jesus’ instructions to the seventy He sent out to the surrounding cities. In verses 10 and following, He explains that it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the Day of Judgment (Great White Throne Judgment) than for those who reject these ambassadors of the Messiah who were among them. Therefore, since there will be a greater condemnation for those who reject a clear presentation of the good news of Jesus, it is a merciful provision of God not to allow some scoffers to hear the gospel.

IV. IF A PERSON DOES NOT BELIEVE IN JESUS DURING THIS LIFE, WHAT WOULD PERSUADE HIM OR HER TO BELIEVE AFTER DEATH?¹⁵

A. A Miracle Will Not Be Enough to Persuade

This point is illustrated in Luke 16. A deceased man in torment in Hades asked Abraham to send Lazarus back from the dead to warn his five brothers so they would not end up in hell. Abraham responded to that request in this way: “They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.”

The man then attempted to sway him by responding: “No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.”

Abraham’s final reply to the man was: “If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead” (Luke 16:25-31).

Abraham’s point was that if one is not open to the Scriptures, that individual will not believe even if he or she were to witness a miracle. As Jesus proclaimed to the Jewish religious folk: “You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me. But you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life” (John 5:39-40).

Along the same lines, Jesus’ signs (miracles) did not persuade those who were not open to God’s salvation. For example, after He healed a man on the Sabbath, the Pharisees plotted to kill Jesus (Matt 12:13-14). Later, after quoting Isaiah’s announcement that God would put His Spirit upon the Messiah (Matt 12:18-21), Jesus, by the power of the Spirit, healed a man by casting out a demon. However, the religious leaders accused Jesus of performing this sign by the power of Satan (Matt 12:24). Later, after Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, the religious leaders plotted to kill both Jesus and Lazarus (John 11:46-53; 12:10-11).

Indeed, a further point can be made from these examples: If a miracle will not persuade one who is not open to the gospel in this life, why would it persuade that same individual after death? We have already seen that if one dies without hearing the gospel, it is because

¹⁵ In using *person*, the writer is referring to an adult. See the footnote 8, referring to children who die under the age of accountability.

that person was not open to the gospel. If one is not open to the gospel in this life, a miracle will not persuade him to be open to it after death.

B. An Extreme Change in Circumstances Will Not Be Enough to Persuade

To make this point—that an extreme change in circumstances will not be enough to persuade someone after death—we return to the rich man in Hades. He said to Abraham: “If one goes to them from the dead, they will repent” (Luke 16:30). Abraham immediately replied to correct his theology by stating: “If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead” (Luke 16:31).

Note that even after death, the man believed one needed to repent in order to escape his circumstances in hell. Abraham subtly **corrected** him by substituting *persuade* for *repent*. *Persuade* is a synonym for belief, while repentance in Luke (and elsewhere) involves works.¹⁶ In fact, the very reason the man was in hell was due to his misunderstanding that one needed to do good works/live a good life before God in order to escape hell. While Abraham pointed out his wrong theology, there is no indication that the man heeded it. Even after death—even after ending up in Hades—the man still believed good works could save. Thus, it appears that an extreme change in circumstances will not be enough to persuade one after death.

C. A Long, Long Time to Consider Truth Will Not Be Enough to Persuade

The first exhibit we will examine in support of this point—that even a long, long time to consider truth will not be enough to persuade someone after death—is found in Matt 7:21-23 where Jesus proclaimed:

“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the

¹⁶ Note Jesus’ comment in Luke 11:32: “The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here.” When we go back to Jonah to learn the results of Jonah’s preaching, here is what we find: “Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it” (Jonah 3:10). In comparing Jesus’ statement in Luke and God’s view in Jonah, we observe that repentance involves works. Thus, repentance cannot equal believing in Jesus for eternal life.

will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’”

Where might this interaction—between Jesus and those arguing that they need to be allowed into God’s kingdom—take place? The only conceivable opportunity for this to occur is at the Great White Throne Judgment, presented in Rev 20:11-15, at which unbelievers are judged according to their works (20:11-12). As in any courtroom, the Judge (Jesus) will apparently allow the defendants to present their cases. Some will argue their cases based on the great acts they did in Jesus’ name (Matt 7:21-23). Others, as in Luke 13:24-27, will present their petitions based on their association with Him at His first advent: “We ate and drank in Your presence, and You taught in our streets.”¹⁷ Of course, His response in both cases will be: “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!”

Both groups of petitioners will have a long, long time to consider the truth before presenting their cases. After all, the Great White Throne Judgment will occur a full thousand years after Jesus returns to the earth. This means that some of these will have at least three thousand years to consider what they will say to the King; even after all that time, they still will not have believed in Jesus for kingdom entrance.

Keep in mind that an extension of time does not necessarily work to the benefit of an unbeliever. This can be illustrated from 2 Thess 2:9-12 where we read:

The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan...with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved. And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth.

The time frame this passage references is the last half of the Tribulation. The apostle Paul explains that those who previously were not

¹⁷ Of course, this group will consist of first-century Jews from Israel.

open to “the love of the truth that they might be saved” will be handed over to deception. Not only will they be more susceptible to deception—both in this life and after death—but “God will send them strong delusion that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned who did not believe the truth.”

Because of their lack of openness, God will say to them, “Okay; have it your way.” Because “they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved,” they will perish.

“Receiving the love of the truth is the same as believing in Jesus for eternal life...*receiving the love of the truth* equals believing the truth.”¹⁸ Thus, an extension of time does not necessarily work to the benefit of the unbeliever; in fact, given more time, the unbeliever can become more susceptible to deceit and hardness of heart.

V. THOSE CAST INTO HADES WILL NOT LEAVE HADES BEFORE BEING CAST INTO THE LAKE OF FIRE

This point is presented in Revelation: “Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away. And there was found no place for them...Death and Hades delivered up the dead who were in them” (Rev 20:11, 13).

Here, John uses *dead* (*nekros*) to refer to those who are spiritually dead unbelievers. At this judgment, those judged are “the dead...before God” (Rev 20:12). The “dead” at this judgment experience “the second death” in contrast to those whose names are in “the Book of Life” (20:15). This is the meaning John sees in this term, used by Jesus in John 5:25: “The hour is coming, and now is, when the *dead* [*nekros*] will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live.” (Note, also, how Paul uses this term in Eph 2:1.)

These “dead,” who have been in Hades for some time (some, such as OT unbelievers, possibly thousands of years) will not escape the lake of fire. As we observe in Rev 20:15: “And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire.” Because their names are not in the Book of Life, due to their not believing in Jesus for eternal life, they will enter the lake of fire.

¹⁸ Robert N. Wilkin, “Second Thessalonians,” in *The Grace New Testament Commentary*, ed. Robert N. Wilkin (Denton, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2010), 2:956.

Returning to Luke 16 and the formerly rich man in Hades, we observe that the rich man clearly cannot escape from Hades. If he could, he would have warned his brothers himself. If there is a second chance for the rich man, the point of the whole account is undermined. In addition, the question must be posed: “Why would the man be so consumed with concern over the fate of his brothers if they can believe later?” The question answers itself.

VI. THOSE CAST INTO THE LAKE OF FIRE WILL NEVER LEAVE THE LAKE OF FIRE

As we learned earlier, all those currently in Hades will enter the lake of fire. Once in the lake of fire, there is no escape, as we see in Rev 14:11, which proclaims that “the smoke of their torment ascends forever and ever; and they have no rest day or night...” Granted, this refers to unbelievers during the Tribulation, but what makes them different from unbelievers who have lived during other ages?

In addition, Jesus, in Mark 3:29, reveals that the condemnation of unbelievers is eternal. Condemnation is not described as a temporary condition until they believe. Thus, there is no time after death during which any unbeliever will believe Jesus for eternal life.

VII. SUMMARY

Those who never heard will **not** get a second chance to believe after death. Hebrews 9:27 reveals that “it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment.” This verse indicates that there is no second chance following death—not for believers or unbelievers.¹⁹ Thus, those who die in unbelief will not get a second chance to believe in Jesus following death. (To illustrate to his Christian audience that there is no second chance after death, the author of Hebrews used the example of Esau, who gave up his birthright and could not get it back “though he diligently sought it with tears” [12:17].)

In addition, as we have seen, unbelievers who are not open to the gospel during their lives on earth will not be open to believing in Jesus for eternal life after death. Thus, no unbeliever will obtain salvation after death.

¹⁹ Each classification will have its own judgment. Believers will face the Judgment Seat of Christ, while unbelievers will encounter the Great White Throne Judgment. Neither group will have a second chance to prepare for their judgment.

VIII. CONCLUSION

After reading this article, there still could be questions, so I want to take this opportunity to answer a couple that I can anticipate. One question might be stated something like this: “At the name of Jesus, every knee shall bow...” (Phil 2:10; also, Rom 14:11; Isa 45:23), so doesn’t that indicate that all unbelievers will eventually believe in Jesus?”

The answer to this question is “no.” This quotation indicates that all will eventually recognize Jesus as Lord, but recognizing Jesus as Lord is not the way to enter the kingdom, as Jesus reveals in Matt 7:21: “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven.” Doing the will of the Father involves believing in Jesus for eternal life (cf. Matt 21:28-32; John 6:40), not recognizing Him as Lord.

Another question may run something like this: “But could unbelievers eventually (after death) believe in Jesus, yet not be saved (receive eternal life)?”

The answer to this question is also “no.” We learn from 1 John 5:1 that “*whoever* believes Jesus is the Christ is born of God.” Therefore, one cannot believe Jesus is the Christ (the Giver of eternal life to whoever believes in Him for it) without receiving eternal life (being born again).

Furthermore, if God truly desires all people to be saved (1 Tim 2:4), why, then, would He put a “stopwatch” on the time frame (from birth to death) during which people could believe and be saved? Does God truly desire all men to be saved if, following death, they were to believe Jesus is the Christ, but God then said, “Too late! You did not believe in time.”

This does not present the Biblical God of love or the God who desires all men to be saved. Rather, God understands that if one will believe, he or she will either believe prior to death, or they will not believe at all.

I will conclude with an observation pointed out to me by Bob Wilkin. In John 11:26, Jesus proclaimed: “Whoever *lives* and believes in Me shall never die [*italics added for emphasis*].” Of course, Jesus was very purposeful with His choice of wording. Thus, the promise of eternal life is to those who *live*, not to those who have died. For if one will not believe prior to death, he or she will not believe following it.

INCLUSIVITY CONTRADICTS SCRIPTURE

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I. INTRODUCTION

To be inclusive is to include. In our postmodern world, inclusivity and pluralism are highly valued.

In terms of Christianity, inclusivity often means universalism—that everyone will be saved whether he or she believes in Jesus Christ or not.

I call that a broad view of inclusivity.

There is also a view of inclusivity that stops short of universalism. I call that a narrow view of inclusivity.

II. MANY EVANGELICALS ARE INCLUSIVE CONCERNING SALVATION AND DISCIPLESHIP

At the Gospel Coalition website, Trevor Wax indicates that inclusivism has different nuances: “In evangelicalism, no monolithic movement of ‘inclusivists’ exists. Each inclusivist scholar will define and describe the inclusivist position with different nuances.”¹

A broad view of inclusivism accepts that people can be born again without explicit faith in Christ.² Wax writes, “The inclusivist affirmation of salvation for people apart from conscious faith in Christ is what separates the inclusivists from exclusivism.”

That can easily result in universalism. In that view, everyone will be saved because of the shed blood of Christ. Faith in Christ is not required.

Ligonier Ministries writes:

Inclusivism teaches that God saves individuals by Jesus Christ even though they have never heard the message of the gospel. Inclusivism is distinguished

¹ Trevin Wax, “What Is Inclusivism and Why Does It Matter?” The Gospel Coalition, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/what-is-inclusivism-and-why-does-it-matter/>. Last accessed Nov 10, 2023.

² See Kevin Jackson, “The Case for Inclusivism,” Wesley Arminian, <https://wesleyanarminian.wordpress.com/2012/01/25/the-case-for-inclusivism/>. Last accessed Nov 9, 2023.

from pluralism in that it teaches that people who follow other religions are saved by Christ and not by those religions. Both inclusivism and pluralism, however, agree that people are saved apart from conscious faith in Christ. Inclusivism and pluralism both stand in sharp opposition to exclusivism.³

A lesser type of inclusivism exists, which I want to address in this article. It is the view that most people *within Christianity* are born again but that most or all outside of Christianity are not. It holds to near universalism *for professing Christians only*.

Most professing Christians today hold to the narrow view of universalism. For example, Calvinists and Arminians today believe they are all born again since they all believe in the necessity of perseverance in faith and good works. Catholics and Protestants are no longer at odds. The vast majority of people who identify as Evangelical believe that most people in Christianity are saved (at least for now).

In this lesser type of inclusivity, only those who believe in Jesus Christ are born again. However, in this view, to believe in Jesus Christ is to believe certain facts about Him: He is God, He died on the cross for our sins, and He rose from the dead. According to this view, a person doesn't need to believe in His promise of everlasting life by faith alone in order to be justified. A person does not even need to believe in life after death. He or she must believe in Jesus' deity, death, and resurrection—and that only.

The broad view of inclusivity regarding salvation often includes inclusivity in terms of sanctification. For instance, many inclusivists believe that homosexuality and same-sex marriage should be accepted in churches.

In an article entitled "Evangelical and Inclusive," Tim Chesterton, a Canadian Anglican priest, writes, "Witness the vast number of possible evangelical hyphenations, including Calvinist, conservative, liberal, charismatic, Pentecostal, dispensational, open, affirming, inclusive, reformed, radical, fundamentalist, mainstream, neo-, post-, etc."⁴ He has an inclusive view that most professing Christians are born again.

Chesterton then addresses a sanctification issue, the issue of same-sex marriage:

³ See "Inclusivism" at <https://www.ligonier.org/guides/inclusivism>. Last accessed Nov 9, 2023.

⁴ See Tim Chesterton, "Evangelical and Inclusive," [InclusiveEvangelicals.com](https://www.inclusiveevangelicals.com/post/evangelical-and-inclusive) <https://www.inclusiveevangelicals.com/post/evangelical-and-inclusive>. Last accessed Nov 7, 2023.

And now we inclusive evangelicals, in our turn, believe we need to be open to fresh readings of the texts which have traditionally been understood to rule out same-sex relationships. Responsible scholars are proposing different ways of understanding those texts, and we need to pay attention to them. This is not an act of disloyalty to our evangelical tradition. In fact, in raising these issues we are standing right at the centre [sic] of our evangelical tradition, which has always been willing to dig deeper into the scriptures and question accepted ways of understanding them.⁵

Megachurch Pastor Andy Stanley has received much criticism from exclusive Evangelicals because he has welcomed practicing homosexuals into his church.⁶ He even had Justin Lee and Brian Nietzel, two unrepentant gay men, speak at his recent Unconditional Conference on LGBTQ issues. Michael Brown commented,

It is true that, on the Sunday following the Unconditional Conference, Pastor Stanley reaffirmed that biblical marriage is the union of a man and a woman and claimed that his church did not condone sin, although he made other statements that muddled the water and caused confusion.

But he also stated that both Justin and Brian have spoken to his people before, with his blessing and approval. This means that on several occasions, he has willfully exposed his flock to their message and example, thereby undermining the positive statements he made in his sermon. This is as destructive as it is confusing.⁷

Some inclusive Evangelicals take a different stand on homosexuality. They say that a homosexual is welcome to be a member of their

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Denny Burk, "Is Andy Stanley Affirming? Another Case of Studied Ambiguity on LGBTQ Issues," World, <https://wng.org/opinions/is-andy-stanley-affirming-1674823491>. Last accessed Nov 7, 2023.

⁷ Michael Brown, "It's Time to Be Blunt about Andy Stanley and Gay Christians," Christian Post, <https://www.christianpost.com/voices/its-time-to-be-blunt-about-andy-stanley-and-gay-christians.html>. Last accessed Nov 7, 2023.

church if the person chooses to remain celibate or marry someone of the opposite sex.

In “What Does It Mean to Be a Truly Inclusive Church?” Anne Witton comments:

Some who see sexuality as integral to a person’s identity conclude that full inclusion and embrace of gay people must involve affirming same-sex sexual relationships. As one writer puts it, to do otherwise would be “welcoming the left-handed so long as they don’t use their left hand.” There is no distinction between people and practice. It seems LGBT people are unique in being accepted without a challenge to submit all areas, including sexuality, to the Lordship of Christ.

However, even some holding an affirming position on gay sexual relationships have recognised [sic] that there need to be boundaries to inclusion.⁸

Is it nitpicking to point out, as Witton implies, that being left-handed is different from being a practicing homosexual? Paul never denounced left-handedness. But he did denounce homosexuality on several occasions (Rom 1:26-27; 1 Cor 6:9; cf. Lev 18:22; 20:13).

Of course, homosexuals gain everlasting life by faith in Christ, just as everyone does (John 3:16).⁹ But in order to follow Christ, a homosexual must indeed either become celibate or marry someone of the opposite sex. Left-handed people are welcome to remain left-handed.

Free Grace people have reason to be concerned about inclusivity in evangelism and discipleship.

Concerning evangelism, we do not agree that most people in Christianity are born again. Why? Because most people do not believe in Jesus, the Giver, for the gift of God, that is, everlasting life (John 4:10-14; see also John 3:16; 5:24; 6:47; 11:25-27; Gal 2:16; Eph 2:8-9; Rev 22:17). Most people in Christianity, whether Arminian or Reformed, believe in some form of Lordship Salvation.

⁸ Anne Witton, “What Does it Mean to be a Truly Inclusive Church?” *Living Out*, <https://www.livingout.org/resources/articles/105/what-does-it-mean-to-be-a-truly-inclusive-church>. Last accessed Nov 7, 2023.

⁹ Bob Wilkin, “Can LGBT People Be Saved?” *Grace Evangelical Society*, <https://faithalone.org/blog/can-lgbt-people-be-saved/>. Last accessed Nov 10, 2023.

We see the need to engage fellow Evangelicals in conversations about the assurance of everlasting life and the nature of the saving message. We believe that most Evangelicals need evangelizing.

Concerning discipleship, we disagree that churches should welcome practicing homosexuals to the Lord's Supper and to teach in the church. We welcome practicing homosexuals to come to hear the Bible being taught. However, they would be excluded from membership, the Lord's Supper, or any teaching roles unless and until they repent.

III. SOME WHO IDENTIFY AS FREE GRACE ARE INCLUSIVE CONCERNING SALVATION

People who hold to Flexible Free Grace (FlexFG) are inclusive regarding salvation within Christianity. They believe that most professing Christians are born again because most believe what they say is the saving message. (More on their view of the saving message shortly.)

A professor of systematic theology and church history who teaches at a school that identifies with Free Grace Theology says,

Scripture teaches you become a Christian by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Savior. No good works are required. *But where does Scripture state [that] adding good works (that God produces in us) negates faith in who Jesus is for salvation? It is wrong, but it does not negate faith in Jesus Christ as God and Savior for justification.*¹⁰

He then suggests that “Evangelicals want to oust some Christians as ‘true Christians’ because they add works for final salvation. Roman Catholics, Calvinists, Arminians [sic], and other Protestants *all* add works.”¹¹ He includes GES and me among these Evangelicals. He then adds,

Therefore, if all Roman Catholics are non-Christians, then so are all other Protestants *except those few believing in eternal security without works.*¹² That is the problem with “faith alone in Christ alone” as a requirement for justification. I believe “faith alone in Christ alone”

¹⁰ Kenneth Wilson, *Heresy of the Grace Evangelical Society: Become a Christian Without Faith in Jesus as God and Savior* (N.p.: Regula Fidei Press, 2020), 133. Emphasis added.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Didn't the Lord Jesus say that the way that leads to life is narrow, and “few find it” (Matt 7:14)?

to be a true statement. *But it does not mean that any addition of works nullifies a person's faith in Jesus Christ as God and Savior from sin for justification.*¹³

Another seminary professor, who identifies as a Free Grace proponent, calls requiring believing in Jesus for irrevocable salvation “an unwarranted addition to salvation by faith alone in Christ alone.”¹⁴ He also calls it “a myopic view of salvation in this Gospel [the Gospel of John].”¹⁵

A seminary president of a school that says it teaches Free Grace Theology wrote a journal article suggesting that nearly everyone in Christianity up until 1517 was born again:

So, unless Christ built His church [sic] on an organization of unbelievers, I would conclude that the teaching that belief in eternal security is a requirement for justification is based on insufficient historical theology. The church flourished. Yet there is no record of anyone who believed in eternal security or had assurance of his salvation. Are we really ready to say that all the people of whom we have a written record between the apostles and the Reformers went to hell? The historical theology which would claim such is insufficient, and so is the biblical theology behind this position.¹⁶

Concerning Biblical theology, he suggested four flaws in the view that one must believe in Jesus for irrevocable salvation.

First, he thinks that John's Gospel is not the only evangelistic book in Scripture. He writes, “It is tenuous at best to declare categorically that the Gospel of John is the only New Testament book written for

¹³ Wilson, *Heresy*, 134. Emphasis added. He means that a person who believes that Jesus saves him for now is born again, even if he believes he might lose his salvation in the next minute by committing a major sin, and even if he believes he must persevere in faith and good works until death in order to win “final salvation.” However, if Jesus is my Savior, He has saved me once and for all. If not, He is not yet my Savior.

¹⁴ Charlie Bing, *GraceNotes* #79, Grace Life, <https://www.gracelife.org/resources/gracenotes/?id=79&lang=eng>. Last accessed Nov 6, 2023.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ David R. Anderson, “Is Belief in Eternal Security Necessary for Justification?” *CTS Journal* 13 (Spring 2008): 49.

unbelievers and therefore the final word in the New Testament on evangelism.”¹⁷

Second, he thinks that John’s Gospel may not have been written to unbelievers and may not have been evangelistic. “How do we know it was written to unbelievers?”¹⁸ However, he went on to answer his own question when he wrote, “These eight signs were written in order to persuade unbelievers to believe.”¹⁹ He thinks, however, that there were also believing readers, and John’s purpose for those readers was not evangelistic:

But the material containing the eight signs hardly comprises the entire book. There is a large section written about Jesus’ interaction and revelation of intimate truth for believers (the Upper Room Discourse, John 13–17). In that section of John the unbeliever (Judas) is sent out because that which was to be shared was not for him. Why include this section in a book written to unbelievers?²⁰

Third, he believes that everlasting life does not refer to life that can never be lost. He says,

The point is that “eternal security,” as we understand it in modern theological circles (once saved always saved) is not an apt and equivalent substitution for “eternal life” in many biblical examples. Even in John’s Gospel, “eternal life” does not always refer to the gift of life forever in linear time.²¹

Fourth, he argues that the book of Acts is evangelistic and that it never offers a secure salvation to those who believe in Jesus.²²

Proponents of FlexFG suggest several different saving messages related to the content of saving faith. In order for most people in Christianity to be born again, the saving message must be one that most

¹⁷ Ibid., 50–51. Inexplicably, he fails to discuss John 20:30–31, the purpose statement in John’s Gospel in this section. However, he does discuss it in the next.

¹⁸ Ibid., 51.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid. For a response, see Zane C. Hodges, “Introducing John’s Gospel: In the Upper Room with Jesus the Christ,” Part 1. Available at chrome-extension://efaidnbmninnbpcapjcgclcfndmkaj/https://faithalone.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Hodges.pdf.

²¹ Ibid., 52–53.

²² Ibid., 54–55.

Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants believe. The faith-alone message is not one that most professing Christians believe.

Some FlexFG teachers say that anyone who believes in Jesus' deity, death, and resurrection is born again. That is something most professing Christians believe.

A FlexFG seminary professor writes:

The doctrine of eternal security is a wonderful and comforting assurance that those who have eternal life can never lose it, but to demand that an unsaved person grasp this in order to be saved is an unnecessary addition to the saving gospel. A person who believes in the Lord Jesus Christ as their Savior who died for their sins and rose again is adequate for salvation.²³

Another seminary professor said, "Scripture teaches [that] you become a Christian by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Savior."²⁴ By *Savior*, he does not mean that Jesus has saved him once and for all. He means that Jesus died on the cross for his sins to make future eschatological salvation possible (but not guaranteed).

The seminary professor just cited also implied that anyone who believes that God sent Jesus is born again. He wrote:

From the overwhelming frequency of passages where Jesus' identity must be accepted or believed, one could argue that who Jesus is [is] the focus of the saving message in John—He is the One sent from God. His identity is certainly the emphasis of the prologue (John 1:1-18).²⁵

That is something all professing Christians believe. In fact, many non-Christians believe Jesus "is the One sent from God." The Quran teaches that Jesus (Isa) is one of God's greatest prophets. Hindus believe that Jesus was a holy man who taught by example (an acharya).

The teacher cited seems to imply that people can be born again in two ways: Believe in Jesus' deity, death, and resurrection, or believe that "He is the One sent from God."

²³ Charlie Bing, "Does John's Gospel Demand Belief in Eternal Security for Salvation?" GraceNotes #79. <https://www.gracelife.org/resources/gracenotes/?id=79&lang=eng>. Last accessed Nov 8, 2023.

²⁴ Wilson, *Heresy*, 133.

²⁵ Ibid.

Some FlexFG proponents are inclusive concerning the fate of those who never heard about Jesus before they died. According to these proponents, anyone who died without ever having heard about Jesus must be born again posthumously, because it would be unjust to condemn such people.

What about those who heard something about Jesus but never heard a clear explanation of the saving message before they died? The same argument logically applies.

Of course, that would mean that missions and evangelism are bad because they make people accountable who would otherwise not have been accountable.

Some FlexFG advocates seem to be moving toward a broad view of inclusivity, that is, to universalism.

IV. THE LORD JESUS AND HIS APOSTLES WERE VERY EXCLUSIVE

John 3:16 is narrow. Only those who believe in Him have everlasting life. In fact, the Lord said that those who do not believe “are condemned already” (John 3:18).

God the Father sent the Lord Jesus Christ to earth to die on the cross for our sins *because He loves us*. To be born again, we must be persuaded that whoever believes in Jesus will never perish but has everlasting life. Most professing Christians do not believe that.

John 5:39-40 is very exclusive. One must come to Jesus—that is, one must believe in Him—to have everlasting life. Most of the Jewish people were *unwilling to come to Him* that they might have everlasting life.

John 4:10-26 restricts those who have everlasting life to those who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Giver, for the gift of God, which is everlasting life. Failure to believe in the gift He promises is the same as not believing in Him in the Johannine sense.

Jesus made a very exclusive claim when He said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me” (John 14:6).

The Lord specifically spoke of the narrow way in Matt 7:13-14. His is the narrow way that few find. We know from John’s Gospel that faith alone in Christ alone is the narrow way.

Paul said he was an example of those who would believe in Jesus “for everlasting life” (1 Tim 1:16). If someone believes in Jesus’ deity, death, and resurrection but has not believed in His promise of everlasting life, he is not yet born again.

In his first epistle, John said that to be born again, one must believe the testimony of God concerning His Son. That testimony is that the one who believes in the Son has everlasting life (1 John 5:9-13).

At the Jerusalem Council, Peter defended the faith-alone message (Acts 15:7-11).

Paul’s ministry to the churches of Galatia was challenged by a group of false teachers we call *Judaizers* (e.g., Gal 1:6-9; 3:1-4; 4:17-20). They said that a person had to be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses, in addition to believing in Jesus, to be justified before God (Gal 2:16; 5:4). Paul would not budge. He was adamant in his narrow stance.

Jesus’ ministry, and that of His apostles, were exclusive.

V. INCLUSIVISM AND THE HISTORY OF GES

GES began in the summer of 1986 when I sent the first newsletter to thirty friends. Later that year, GES was incorporated. In the summer of 1987, I left my teaching position at Multnomah School of the Bible and became the full-time executive director of GES. We had a board of ten people, most of whom had been my contemporaries during our days at Dallas Theological Seminary.

Between 1992 and 1995, five members of the GES Board were pushing toward GES becoming more inclusive. At first, I thought that meant they wanted to find more people who agreed with our faith-alone position. I came to realize, however, that they wanted to include people who disagreed with us. To be sure, they wanted to bring in people who agreed with us on some issues, like the deity, death, and resurrection of Jesus. But they also wanted to include mild Lordship Salvation advocates, though they did not use that language.

At a board meeting in 1994, the chairman and several of the members floated the idea of hiring a new executive director to move GES to a more inclusive stance. I was to stay on as a writer, editor, and speaker.

I told the board that I would leave GES if the doctrinal distinctions we had established were abandoned. I felt that we could not be more inclusive than we already were.

My friends were shocked that I was prepared to leave GES. They felt my continued involvement was necessary. As a result, the board backed off their suggestion that we hire a new head of the organization.

However, they did not abandon their desire to make GES more inclusive. They hoped they could accomplish that even with me still heading the organization.

At our 1995 summer board meeting, I told the members that I wanted all board members to agree with the direction that I had set for the organization. They asked what I wanted those who disagreed to do. I told them I wanted anyone who disagreed with our direction to step down from the board.

As a result, half the board resigned.

We had dodged a bullet that would have derailed GES.

At our 2003 annual conference, one of those initial board members who had wanted GES to be more inclusive sponsored a dinner for about twenty-five people. At this meeting, Dr. Earl Radmacher said it was time for a new Free Grace organization. This new organization would be designed to connect Free Grace ministries and people.

GES was already bringing Free Grace people together and helping them and their ministries. I believed the actual purpose of the new Free Grace organization would be to achieve what half of my original board had wanted: a more inclusive Free Grace organization.

Incorporation of the new organization occurred in 2004. At our 2004, 2005, and 2006 annual conferences, it held board meetings in the evenings at our host hotel.

The new organization published a brochure called "Come be a leader..." In a section entitled, "A Vision for Grace," they wrote: "Our hope is for the term 'Free Grace' to become associated with *a broad alliance of Christian scholars, leaders, and laborers of diverse churches, ministries, and associations*" (emphasis added).²⁶ The aim of being more inclusive was clearly presented.

Our 2006 annual conference was the last time those in the new organization attended. A major disagreement arose over whether someone had to believe in the promise of irrevocable salvation/life in order to be born again. The people from the new, more inclusive, organization said "no." To say "yes" was considered too narrow of a stance. As a result, a split occurred.

²⁶ *Come be a leader...* Published by Free Grace Alliance. No date or place of publication was listed.

The new organization began having its own annual conference later that year.

Around 2010, the new Free Grace organization said online that GES preaches a false gospel and that they had separated from us. That statement stayed on their website until early in 2012. Here is what they posted under the heading “*Gospel Clarification*”:

After much discussion and reflection, the FGA Executive Council has concluded that in light of misunderstandings in our broader Christian community, it is important for us to issue the following statement:

The Free Grace Alliance is not associated with the Grace Evangelical Society and does not endorse the GES Gospel (also referred to as “crossless” or “promise only” by some). We invite those who share our heart for the Gospel’s clarity and declaration, of both the Person and Work of Christ, to join hands with us.²⁷

Notice that the statement refers to “our *broader* Christian community” (emphasis added). That is the same language in the brochure cited above: “Our hope is for the term ‘Free Grace’ to become associated with a *broad alliance* of Christian scholars, leaders, and laborers of *diverse churches, ministries, and associations*” (emphasis added).

FlexFG advocates have written many articles and several books since then, chastising GES for its narrow stance. This has been, and remains, an issue over which GES receives much criticism and even ridicule.

VI. PRACTICAL PROBLEMS WITH BEING INCLUSIVE REGARDING REGENERATION

I suggest four practical problems.

First, we must follow Scripture, not the consensus of professing Christians (Gal 1:10-12). Inclusivism is impractical because it is contrary to the Word of God.

Steve Lewis warned about consensus theology:

²⁷ That statement is no longer on the FGA website. However, it is available in a blog by Antonio da Rosa entitled, “A Reflection of the Free Grace Theology ‘Food Fight’: Zane Hodges Responds to an Email I Addressed to the Free Grace Alliance Leadership,” <https://free-grace.blogspot.com/2012/03/reflection-of-free-grace-theology-food.html>. Last accessed Nov 9, 2023.

As Evangelicals we sometimes have our own traditions. And these traditions sometimes blind us to the clear meaning of Scripture.

For example, take the response some of us have had to the writings of Zane Hodges.

Some rejected, out of hand, his view on assurance as being of the essence of saving faith.

Others rejected, out of hand, his desert island illustration, and his suggestion that all who simply believe in Jesus have everlasting life that can never be lost.

Still others in Evangelicalism rejected his explanation of the Gospel of John because it contradicted their tradition.

These people did not carefully read and consider his Biblical arguments. If they had, their traditions would have given way to Scripture.²⁸

Second, inclusivity is unworkable because it contradicts the promise of life (e.g., John 3:16; 5:24; 6:47; 11:25-27; 20:31). No one can be born again by believing a false message (cf. John 5:39-40).

Third, anything that displeases God is not pragmatic. God is dismayed by inclusivism (Matt 7:13-14, 21-23; John 5:39-40; 14:6; Rom 10:14-15; Gal 1:6-9; 2:16).

Fourth, one way to avoid persecution from people within Christianity is to embrace the view that most professing Christians are born again. People within Christianity often criticize and persecute those who promote the view that one must believe in Jesus for the promise of everlasting life that cannot be lost in order to be saved. Proponents of inclusivity avoid such criticism (Gal 1:10-12). But that is unwise, because it is a privilege to suffer for our faith in Christ (Acts 5:41; 2 Tim 1:12; 1 Pet 3:14; 4:13) and because shrinking back from suffering displeases God (Heb 11:25; 1 Pet 2:21).

²⁸ Dr. Stephen R. Lewis, "Beware of Consensus Theology," Grace Evangelical Society, <https://faithalone.org/blog/beware-of-consensus-theology/>. Last accessed Nov 10, 2023.

VII. CONCLUSION

I have been with GES for nearly forty years. We have repeatedly had to fight the battle over inclusivity. Many people holding to Free Grace Theology think GES has been too exclusive, narrow, and unbending.

Since there is only one way to gain everlasting life, we *must* stand firm in that way. His name is Jesus. He promises that whoever believes in Him will never perish but has everlasting life.

If the exclusive message Jesus preached does not fit your tradition, change your tradition. If His exclusivity does not match your experience, reject your experience and embrace His teachings. If the faith-alone message seems unfair to you, get over it. What God says is fair whether we approve or not.

If you lament the fact that you are not experiencing much persecution for Christ, proclaim His exclusive way of salvation. You will be persecuted by people from within Christianity.

BOOK REVIEWS

Gentle and Lowly: The Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers.

By Dane Ortland. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020. 224 pp. Paper, \$19.99.

A friend gave me this book. It examines the writings of several Puritans, including Thomas Goodwin, John Bunyan, and Jonathan Edwards.

It is the bestselling book on Amazon.com in the religious counseling category. Over 11,000 people have rated the book.

This book presents a side of Puritanism—the softer side—that is rarely seen.

Some quotations in the book make the Puritan writers—and Ortland as he summarizes their theology—sound as if they held to Free Grace Theology:

“We are apt to think that he, being so holy, is therefore of a severe and sour disposition against sinners, and not able to bear them. ‘No,’ says he; ‘I am meek; gentleness is my nature and temper’” (Goodwin, p. 23).

“It is impossible for the affectionate heart of Christ to be overcelebrated, made too much of, exaggerated” (Ortland, p. 29).

“Authentic regeneration is the invincibilizing [sic] of our future” (Ortland, p. 193).

“As God did not at first choose you because you were high, he will not now forsake you because you are low” (Flavel, p. 194).

“If you are in Christ...your waywardness does not threaten your place in the love of God any more than history itself can be undone” (Ortland, p. 194).

“Nothing can now un-child you. Not even you. Those in Christ are eternally imprisoned with the tender heart of God” (Ortland, p. 195).

“If you are united to Christ, you are as good as in heaven already” (Ortland, p. 195).

“You have often left him; has he ever left you?” (Spurgeon, p. 195).

It is easy to see why people like this book.

As Paul Harvey used to say, I'm going to share *the rest of the story*.

David Engelsma, a modified five-point Calvinist, warned about Puritan theology in his booklet, *The Gift of Assurance*. He wrote:

Do not quench the Spirit of assurance either by listening to Puritan preaching that is forever questioning your assurance, forever challenging your right to assurance, forever sending you on a quest for assurance, and forever instilling doubt. The Spirit does not work assurance by means of a gospel of doubt (p. 53).

While that teaching is not prevalent in *Gentle and Lowly*, it is present. As the quotations given above show, Ortland often writes about "authentic regeneration," "those in Christ," and "if you are united to Christ." That is the Puritan way of saying that eternal security applies only to the elect.

Ortland wrote, "We are talking about something deeper than the doctrine of eternal security...sometimes called the perseverance of the saints" (p. 65). He added, "Yes, professing Christians can fall away, proving that they were never truly in Christ" (p. 66).

I recommend this book for well-grounded believers. There is much encouraging information here, as long as one can avoid getting pulled into a Puritan view of assurance and regeneration.

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Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society

The Rise and Fall of Dispensationalism: How the Evangelical Battle over the End Times Shaped a Nation. By Daniel G. Hummel. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2023. 382 pp. \$29.99.

Daniel Hummel writes as a historian. In *The Rise and Fall of Dispensationalism*, he concludes that dispensationalism has fallen in the sense that it is no longer considered a viable option among most Christian leaders or institutions. He does not argue the Biblical merits, or lack thereof, of the theology, but wants to describe why dispensationalism lost a formerly exalted position in the American religious culture.

Hummel correctly traces the history of dispensationalism to its Plymouth Brethren roots in Ireland and England (p. 6). It was

connected to a new premillennial eschatology. This eschatology maintains that there is an imminent Rapture of the church, that there is a distinction between Israel and the church, that we are currently in a parenthesis before Daniel's 70th week, and that there will be a Tribulation after the Rapture.

Dispensationalism says that the Church is to be heavenly-minded, looking forward to the coming kingdom. There is a dualism between heaven and earth. We are not in the kingdom now. The Scriptures are to be interpreted literally, including the book of Revelation and the OT prophets (pp. 20-24, 43, 70-71). History is to be divided into different dispensations, each of which has ended in failure.

In the 1800s, some people adopted certain dispensational views, such as the Rapture and the soon coming of the Lord, but rejected other aspects. D. L. Moody popularized such teachings (pp. 39, 85). For many, revivals and global missions were emphasized, with the desire to see as many people spiritually saved as possible before the Lord comes (p. 98).

Lewis Sperry Chafer, a disciple of C. I. Scofield, promoted a scholastic dispensationalism. He wanted to systematize the theology and teach it to men and pastors, who would spread it in various denominations. He founded Dallas Theological Seminary for this purpose, and this led to many other seminaries and Bible institutes. These institutions provided a large number of pastors, seminary professors, and Christian leaders (pp. 180, 200). Scholastic dispensationalism flourished through the 1950s (p. 251). It was bolstered by prestigious scholars like Charles Ryrie, John Walvoord, S. Lewis Johnson, and Zane Hodges (p. 253).

Scholastic dispensationalism was spread to the masses through the immensely popular *Scofield Reference Bible* (1909). Missionaries used this as a textbook in the field. Many books were published teaching a dispensational and premillennial framework. All of this emphasized interpreting the Bible literally (pp. 130, 133, 142).

At the same time, *The Fundamentals* (1915), a series of popular articles by different theologians, was published. These presented new premillennialism as the dominant position of evangelicalism (p. 148).

Hummel lists a number of reasons for dispensationalism's fall from popularity. A major reason was the rise of what he calls pop dispensationalism. Hal Lindsey, the author of *The Late Great Planet Earth*,

made millions of dollars using dispensational themes but with little scholarly background. Many followed in his footsteps (pp. 239-40).

Pop dispensationalism was conquering America, but scholastic dispensationalism went into free fall (p. 265). Dispensationalists began to get involved in political issues, predicted the date of Christ's return, and developed fanciful interpretations of the Scriptures while tying them to current events (pp. 234, 256). Pop dispensationalism opened scholastic dispensationalism up to critique and mockery. Hummel not so subtly suggests that even some of the scholarly proponents of the system took advantage of its consumer success. Dispensationalism lost almost all credibility among serious theologians.

Hummel says that a resurgent reconstructionist postmillennialism attacked the dispensational view that the kingdom is a heavenly one. Dallas Theological Seminary was unwilling (or unable?) to respond. Many within the ranks of dispensationalism defected. Many graduates of DTS renounced the theology of dispensationalism. Some of the younger scholars at the school promoted progressive dispensationalism, which Reformed theologians praised, claiming it was nothing more than covenant premillennialism (pp. 312-17). Most seminaries rejected dispensational teaching and did not hire dispensational teachers (p. 262).

Hummel gives the reasons why he thinks scholastic dispensationalism has fallen on hard times from a historical perspective. He obviously thinks this is a good development but does not specifically address whether the fall of dispensationalism is the result of a faulty interpretation of the Scriptures.

While I am sure he does think that is the case, one could also conclude from his book that it was because of the greed, laziness, and weaknesses of dispensational scholars. One could also argue that the dispensationalists were right all along. Dispensationalism has fallen from favor because the world is becoming worse and worse. It only stands to reason that the world would reject the proper handling of God's Word! The reader and the Bible student will have to decide how to interpret the history of dispensationalism.

A couple of points Hummel discusses will be of interest to most readers of the *JOTGES*. Hummel states on many occasions that dispensationalism, along with new premillennialism, are most attractive to white conservative Christians (e.g., pp. 187, 263). He implies that

the emphasis on a totally future kingdom excuses the believer from being concerned about social injustices. For this reason, dispensationalism has not appealed to black churches. Dispensationalists have almost always supported conservative Republican policies.

In this reviewer's opinion, Hummel feels that a strain of racism runs through dispensationalism and at least some of its adherents. The reader of this book will need to decide if racism indeed played some part in the development of dispensationalism. In this reviewer's view, it is obvious that one can see the kingdom as completely "not yet" without being a racist.

Throughout the book, Hummel connects dispensationalism and new premillennialism with Free Grace (FG) theology (pp. 11, 148, 156, 193-94, 309-12, etc.). He claims that this is another reason dispensationalism was attacked and eventually collapsed. He discusses John MacArthur's opposition to FG views and how it drove him to dissociate from much of dispensationalism's teachings and move fairly strongly towards Reformed beliefs, especially in the area of soteriology.

Hummel, however, seems to have a defective view of the FG movement, at least as it is held by GES. He uses the usual pejorative language, such as "cheap grace" and "mental assent," and claims that FG allows believers to keep on sinning. But he also mistakenly says that FG theology asks the unbeliever to say a sinner's prayer or invite Jesus into one's heart.

In this reviewer's opinion, he does not make it clear that being a dispensationalist and being FG are not synonymous. In addition, he does not understand that FG proponents, such as GES, do not teach that it is of no consequence if the believer "keeps on sinning." In all of Hummel's discussions of FG theology, there is not a single mention of rewards or the discipline of God in the life of the believer who sins.

This book is full of historical information about the religious culture of the United States in which practically all readers of the *JOTGES* have taken part. He discusses institutions that many of us have attended and individuals many of us have known. As a historian, Hummel must interpret this mountain of data. None of us will agree with how he does so in some cases, but every reader will learn something about his history from this book. I highly recommend it.

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