

The Historic Protestant Viewpoint and the Free Grace Viewpoint on Conversion (Faith, Repentance, Justification)

Introductory notes:

A. What is the Free Grace position?

Official Free Grace Alliance statement of beliefs

Covenant:

As members of the Evangelical Tradition, we affirm the Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the inspired Word of God and is therefore inerrant in the autographs. Furthermore, God is a Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each an uncreated person, one in essence, equal in power and glory. As members of this tradition, we are concerned about the clear understanding, presentation, and advancement of the Gospel of God's Free Grace.

We affirm the following:

- The Grace of God in justification is an unconditional free gift.
- The sole means of receiving the free gift of eternal life is faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, whose substitutionary death on the cross fully satisfied the requirement for our justification.¹
- Faith is a personal response, apart from our works, whereby we are persuaded that the finished work of Jesus Christ, His death and resurrection, has delivered us from condemnation and guaranteed our eternal life.²
- Christ has delivered us from condemnation and guaranteed our eternal life.
- Justification is the act of God to declare us righteous when we believe in Jesus Christ alone.
- Assurance of justification is the birthright of every believer from the moment of faith in Jesus Christ, and is founded upon the testimony of God in His written Word.³
- Spiritual growth, which is distinct from justification, is God's expectation for every believer; this growth, however, is not necessarily manifested uniformly in every believer.
- The Gospel of Grace should always be presented with such clarity and simplicity that no impression is left that justification requires any step, response, or action in addition to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.⁴

COVENANT:

In agreement with these affirmations, we covenant to work together graciously and enthusiastically to advance this Gospel of Grace, and to communicate with a positive and gracious tone toward all others, both inside and outside the Free Grace Alliance. [From <http://www.freegracealliance.com/covenant.htm>]

But – the distinctive FG doctrines that I would have concerns about are not evident from this statement.

¹ WG comment: I would agree – but I would have a fuller definition of “faith” than Free Grace advocates—see below]

² WG: This is true, but I think there is more than just being persuaded of this fact.]

³ WG: I would say “some measure of assurance” – more later]

⁴ WG: If I could define “faith” in the way Protestant teachers have historically defined it, to include repentance from sin, and to include a heartfelt personal receiving of Christ as Lord and God into one's life, and to specify that genuine faith will always produce evident works, then I could even agree with this too. – but the FGA has a specialized, more narrow understanding of “faith,” which excludes these things, and with which I could not agree]

B. My summary of Free Grace teachings that cause me concern:

The “Free Grace” position claims that we are justified* by faith alone. Therefore, it says, it is incorrect to claim that any other things will necessarily accompany saving faith, either as a part of faith (such as repentance) or as a necessary result of faith (such as works, and continuing in faith).

[* Both sides agree that justification is an act of God by which he declares that our sins are forgiven and perfect righteousness is credited (“imputed”) to us. Both sides also agree that we are justified by “faith alone” (Latin *sola fide*).]

Therefore, according to the Free Grace position:

1. Repentance (in the sense of sorrow for sin and a decision of the will to forsake sin) is not a necessary condition for or a part of saving faith.

(“Repentance” in the New Testament means to change one’s mind, and repentance in that sense is necessary).

2. Evangelistic messages should not include a call to repentance from sin (in the sense of feeling sorrow for sin and deciding to turn away from sin).

3. Saving faith will not necessarily continue throughout a person’s entire life. A person who has saving faith might later renounce that faith, but such a person is still saved. (analogy of receiving \$100 bill with hand that is later cut off)

4. Saving faith does not necessarily produce outwardly evident works. It is possible for a person to have saving faith but no evident works even for a period of many years. Such a person is still saved (but is a carnal Christian). (There will be works in every person who has saving faith, but these works might be known only to God.)

5. The common statement, “We are justified by faith alone, but the faith that justifies is never alone” is both incorrect and logically contradictory

6. There are no passages in the New Testament epistles that warn churchgoers that they might not be saved. The warning passages in the New Testament epistles (such as John 15:6; 2 Cor. 13:5; Col 1:23; Heb. 3:12-14; James 2:17; 5:19-20) warn people against loss of something else, such as loss of deliverance from danger in this life or loss of reward in the next. (Since these were times of persecution it is unlikely that there would be many unsaved churchgoers in these churches.)

7. New Testament passages that encourage believers to examine their conduct of life (such as 1 John 1-4) are not intended to give deeper assurance of salvation but assurance of being in fellowship with God, or (with other passages) assurance of other present blessings or future rewards.

C. Explanation of my concerns about the Free Grace view:

(Note: I agree that God’s grace in salvation is totally free, as taught in Rom. 6:23; Eph. 2:8-9. It is not this idea that I am objecting to but the collection of beliefs known today as “Free Grace theology.”)

1. It differs with the historic Protestant view of saving faith. The consistent Protestant teaching from the Reformation onward has been that we are justified faith alone, but the faith that saves is never alone.

a. This is the repeated teaching of the great Reformation teachers and confessions

John Calvin (1509-1564; Reformed);

Formula of Concord (great summary of Lutheran doctrine, 1576):

39 Articles of Church of England (1571, Anglican or Episcopalian)

Westminster Confession of Faith (1646, Reformed/ Presbyterian):

b. There is no logical difficulty in this. (Rom 8:29-30)

→ Example of key ring for Phx Sem keys

c. Therefore the Free Grace movement today is not upholding the Reformation doctrine of *sola fide*, or “justification by faith alone.”

Then what is its proof that its view of repentance, faith, and works is correct? Not the history of Reformation or Protestantism, whose key teaching was “justification by faith alone.”

-- Must find support only from the claim that NT teaches this view.

But where is it in the NT? Where does NT ever say that faith occurs by itself in a person who is saved? I think nowhere.

There is much NT teaching that faith is never alone but many changes come once one believes in Christ: (2 Corinthians 5:17) Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

Paul does not say "you were justified and nothing else when you believed"

but [after long list of sins:] And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. (1Co 6:11)

2. It weakens the gospel message by avoiding any call to repent of one's sins.

a. In the NT, saving faith includes both turning from sin (repentance) and turning to God (faith)

Heb 6:1; Ac 20:21; Isaiah 55:6-7; Bauer Greek-English Lexicon *metanoeō*, all English translations.

English word "repent" in religious sense: 3. To make a change for the better as a result of remorse or contrition for one's sins. (*American Heritage Dictionary*, 2006)

Luke 18:18-30; 19:1-10; John 4:16; Matthew 3:2 Luke 24:47 Acts 2:38; 3:19; 17:30; 26:20

(However, I am not willing to say that initial saving faith requires absolute, total commitment of life, for then nobody would be saved in this life. Yes, Jesus demands this, and he is Lord of all. But we cannot fulfill that demand in this life. And I do not believe that saving faith includes obedience. I think it results in obedience.)

→ Concern #2 is a major concern.

→ deeply concerned that a weakened gospel message, which lacks any call to repent from sins, will result in many unsaved people who think they are saved.

3. Some FG proponents weaken the gospel message by failing to place a clear emphasis on the need for an interpersonal receiving of and trusting in Christ as something more than believing that I am a sinner and Christ is my Savior

Z. Hodges *Absolutely Free* (1989), p. 31: Faith is "the inward conviction that what God says to us in the gospel is true. That – and that alone – is saving faith."

GES statement of faith: "Faith is the conviction that something is true. 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 (John 4:14; 5:24; 6:47; 11:26; 1 Tim 1:16)."

Free Grace Alliance people – assure me they are different in this regard: They insist faith comes to rest in person of Lord Jesus Christ → I am not talking about Fred Chay or FGA in this section --

→ **Saving faith requires trust in the person of Christ, and mental agreement with facts about Christ without personal trust in Christ is not saving faith**

(1) Saving faith is pictured as "coming to Christ" (John 6:37, 35, 44; 7:37; Matt. 11:28; Heb 7:25)

(2) Saving faith is pictured as "receiving" Christ (John 1:11; Col 2:6)

(3) Saving faith is pictured as "believing" something with your heart (Rom 10:9-10; Ac 16:14; Ezek. 36:26)

(4) Saving faith is portrayed as "believing in" a person (John 3:16)

BDAG Greek-English Lexicon, *pisteuō* (meaning 2, with persons): "to entrust oneself to an entity in complete confidence, believe (in), trust, with implication of total commitment to the one who is trusted."

→ Concern #3 is significant because, once again, the result of this weakened gospel may be many unsaved churchgoers who think they are saved.

4. It deprives churchgoers of the benefit of NT warnings to examine themselves because some of them might not be saved.

(2 Corinthians 13:5) Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?-- unless indeed you fail to meet the test!

(Hebrews 3:12) Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. (See also John 15:6 James 2:14-17 John 2:3-5 1 John 3:9-10)

→ FG advocates give alternative explanations for these vss.

But: D. A. Carson, of Zane Hodges: "to the best of my knowledge not one significant interpreter of

Scripture in the entire history of the church has held to Hodges's pattern of interpretation of the passages he treats" (*Exegetical Fallacies*, 129, speaking of *The Gospel under Siege*, 1981)

5. It wrongly gives assurance of eternal life to people who profess faith in Christ (or who formerly professed faith) but show no evidence in their pattern of life.

→ NT writers do not do this (see James 2:17: faith without works is dead)

6. It deprives true Christians of enjoying the deeper assurance of salvation that NT authors want them to gain from seeing that God has changed their lives.

And Grace Evangelical Society statement:

Assurance of everlasting life is based only on the promise God makes in His Word that everyone who believes in Jesus Christ alone possesses everlasting life (John 5:24; 1 John 5:9-13). Good works, which can and should follow regeneration, are not necessary for a person to have assurance of everlasting life (Eph 2:10 ; Titus 3:8).

Assurance is of the essence of believing in Jesus for everlasting life. That is, as long as a person believes in Jesus for everlasting life, he knows he has everlasting life (John 5:24 ; 6:35 , 47; 11:27 ; 1 John 5:9-13).

→ Response: all the testing verses in the previous section that give other grounds, plus:

(2 Peter 1:10) Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. [virtue, knowledge, self-control, steadfastness, godliness, brotherly affection, love]

(1 John 3:14) We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers.

Whoever does not love abides in death.

(1 John 5:13) I write these things [I think entire book of 1 John] to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life.

7. It depends on numerous unusual, unpersuasive, idiosyncratic interpretations of NT texts

Examples:

-- Z. Hodges, *Absolutely Free*: Rom 10:9-17 (194-197); Luke 16:30 (226); 18:22 (186); Acts 11:18 (153); 17:30 (145); 26:19-20 (163-167) – see D.A. Carson quote in #4 above

-- James 2:14 “can that faith save him?”: “save” = from some physical danger

-- Some Christians will be excluded from the Marriage Supper of the Lamb (Matt. 8:11-12; 22:12-13) and will be cast into “outer darkness” (Matt. 8:12; 22:13; 25:30) and will experience “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matt. 8:12; 22:13; 25:30) in Christ’s future Millennial kingdom. (Not all Free Grace advocates hold this.)

-- Some Christians will enter but not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:9-10; Gal 5:19-21; Eph. 5:5)

-- many others

8. In some parts of the movement, it fails to make it easy for outsiders to the movement to discover where its essential teachings are different from non-Free Grace evangelicals (obscurity regarding what makes it distinctive)

Audio recordings of classes and these handouts are available on the class website: <http://www.christianessentialsbc.com>.

See also www.waynegrudem.com