

What is Free Grace Theology? By Fred Chay*

Often times the best way to explain what you mean is to compare and contrast what you mean with what you do not mean. "Free Grace" theology stands in contrast to "Lordship Salvation" theology. By that I mean the following distinctions.

1. "Free Grace" theology teaches that we receive eternal life the moment we believe in Jesus Christ as our personal Savior and Lord. "Lord" refers to our belief that He is the Son of God and therefore, able to be our "Savior". "Faith" is viewed as a simple and uncomplicated response to the truth God has revealed about His Son, and the Gift which He offers. When Jesus says "Truly, Truly I say unto you, he who believes in Me has eternal life" (John 6:47), "believe" means to be convinced and assured that what He says is true. (See John 1:11-13)

"Lordship" theology teaches that "faith" is not a simple and uncomplicated response. It is an all out commitment to follow Jesus Christ that includes the mind heart and will. It is equivilant to being His disciple, to surrender all that we have and are to Him. "Lordship" theology says that "saving faith" involves such a radical turning to Christ and commitment to surrender all and follow Him! That is also why so many of those committed to "Lordship" theology have difficulty with the salvation of children, because in their view, there is just more to it than simply believing in Jesus as your personal Savior. How unlike Jesus who taught that we must have the faith of a little child in order to enter His kingdom

2. "Free Grace" theology distinguishes between the "call to believe" in Jesus Christ as our personal Savior and receiving His gift of eternal life, and the "call to follow" Him and become His disciples. (See John 4 and compare what Jesus told the woman she needed in vs. 10 with what He told His disciples they needed in vs. 31-38).

"Lordship" theology sees faith and discipleship as two sides of the same coin. To "believe" is the same as being willing to become His disciple and follow Him.

3. "Free Grace" theology stresses the believer's assurance of salvation. It teaches that we can know we have eternal life and are going to heaven based on the very promise inherent in the offer itself. (John 3:16; 5:24; 6:47) The Word of God becomes the basis of our assurance of salvation.

"Lordship" theology teaches that we can never be completely sure we are going to heaven until we die, because we might fall away and thus prove that we were not real believers to begin with. We can, however, become somewhat confident if we see the Holy Spirit producing good works in our life. The basis of our assurance of salvation is the change in our life - it is based on what we do. People who validate the reality of their own salvation based on how they live, are usually quick to validate the genuineness of other peoples' salvation on the same basis.

4. "Free Grace" theology teaches that real Christians can fall away, slide into serious sin, and utterly fail. (Consider the many warnings to Christians in the New Testament). Conceivably, Christians could even end up denying the Lord, if they continue forsaking

the truth and hardening themselves to the work of the Spirit of God in their lives. Nevertheless, God does not forsake His children, but patiently disciplines them. (1 Corinthians 10:30-32; Hebrews 6:1-12; 12:) And even if they are "faithless, yet He remains faithful", they will enter into eternal life. (1 Timothy 2:11-13)

"Lordship" theology teaches that if a so-called Christian falls into sin, persists in sin, and does not soon return to the Lord, that that so called Christian is not a real Christian at all. He is only a professing Christian. Real Christians persevere in the faith. If you do not persevere, then you are not a Christian, and you are lost. The logical consequences of such a theology on a believer's sense of security, which is tied to his identity, is defeating. Believers caught up in this theology hear God saying, "If you want to know you are My child, consistently act like My child!"

5. "Free Grace" theology sees the serious warnings and exhortations of the New Testament (from Jesus, Paul, the author of the book of Hebrews, James, and Peter) as encouragement to Christians to persevere in the faith and be faithful in doing good works. Christians soon realize in their walk with God, that to ignore these warnings and exhortations and persist in willful sin, incites Him to discipline His children. On the other hand, a mark of a maturing Christian is joy in doing what the Father asks, knowing that He delights in richly rewarding His children. (Matthew 5:1-15; 1 Corinthians 3:10-15; Hebrews 10:32 ff.)

"Lordship" theology sees the serious warnings and exhortations of the New Testament usually as a test that so called Christians should apply to their lives to see if they are really "possessing Christians" or only "professing Christians" who are deluded and ultimately lost.

6. "Free Grace" theology emphasizes the importance of persevering in doing good works for the Lord's approval and reward. (Matthew 5:1-12; 1 Corinthians 3:11-15; 2 Corinthians 5:9-11) In addition to "crowns" of approval and appreciation, the reward will involve "reigning with Christ" and "inheriting the kingdom."

"Lordship" theology depreciates the New Testament teaching of eternal rewards. Those committed to "Lordship" theology confidently claim that there is no "hierarchy" in heaven. Whatever rewards we do receive will only be momentary and ultimately cast at the feet of Jesus. The primary motivation for doing good works in the Christian life, in addition to validating our salvation, is to say thank you to God for what He has done. To do anything for the thought of a reward is selfish and self-centered. They overlook the teaching in the New Testament that reveals a heavenly Father delighting in seeing His children set their hearts upon laying hold of those things He has reserved in heaven for them. A personal illustration: I have emphasized the wisdom of a college education for my children. It is a "reward" I would like them to have assuming they are capable. When they were young it was not a reward they really wanted or even thought about. As they have matured I hope their love and respect for me will lead them to embrace the reward I want them to have by working hard in school! This illustrates in a very limited way how our heavenly Father wants us to embrace His rewards in our lives.

7. "Free Grace" theology sees a distinction between the New Testament expressions "entering the kingdom" and "inheriting the kingdom". Entering the kingdom means just

that-to enter the kingdom of God. We enter the kingdom by a simple and uncomplicated faith in Jesus Christ as our Savior. "Inheriting the kingdom" means just that--to inherit, own, or possess the kingdom. Believers who have been faithful servants of Christ, enduring hardships, and persevering in good works are "joint heirs with Christ" of the Kingdom. What that means is that they will "reign with Christ", being given authority and power to share in the administration, leadership, and rule of His kingdom forever. (see Romans 8:17, 2 Timothy 2:11-13; Revelation 2-3; 20 -22) Free grace also understands that there are two distinct inheritances. One is positional and passive in that all receive it by virtue of gaining eternal life. The other inheritance is active and conditional based on works. (Eph 1, and 5, Col 1 and 3, Rom 8:17)

"Lordship" theology teaches that there is no difference in the expressions "entering the kingdom" and "inheriting the kingdom." Rather, they refer to the same thing and are equivalent to the expression "going to heaven." Those committed to "Lordship" theology say people will go to heaven by "faith alone in Christ alone, but not by faith that is alone," (John Calvin) by which they mean good works will accompany and validate a person's faith.

8. Most visibly in practice, those who are committed to "Free Grace" theology tend to emphasize Grace in their lives. God's grace overwhelms and moves them, and grace is what they seek to express in the way they live. And when "Free Grace" people are at their worst, what they most often need is more grace.

On the other hand, those who are committed to "Lordship" theology tend to emphasize works in their lives. The necessity to do good works to prove themselves overwhelms and moves them. And when "Lordship" people are at their worst, legalism and a lack of graciousness mark their lives, and their churches.

*The preceding material is adapted from the teachings that represent modern Free Grace Theology as articulated by the Free Grace Alliance and Grace Line and is an edited summary of an article by Arch Rutherford.