

Bible Study on Hermeneutics – Handout Session 10

Controversial Doctrines, Practices, and Passages

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The Lordship Salvation Controversy

Introduction: The concept of “Lordship salvation” came about as a contradiction to the era of “easy believe-ism” that crept into the evangelical church beginning in the mid 20th century. The evangelical community has largely accepted “easy believe-ism” as the biblical standard. It was aided by the theological development of the “Carnal Christian” concept (a Christian that acts exactly like a non-Christian) from 1st Corinthians 3.

Definition: “Lordship salvation is a teaching in Christian theology which maintains that good works are a necessary consequence of being declared righteous before God. In other words, Jesus cannot be considered a person’s savior (that is, bringer of salvation without simultaneously being lord of the person’s life, which is demonstrated by the gradual purification from sin and the exercising of good works. Advocates and opponents of the doctrine within Protestantism all agree that acceptance before God is through faith alone by grace alone, but they differ on whether true justification can ever be followed by leading a worldly life or even apostasy.

The opposing position is called **Free Grace theology** which maintains that the Lordship salvation view is marked by legalism and a lack of graciousness. In particular, Free Grace theology claims that the Lordship position is “fixated” on the works-minded Gospel of Matthew while overlooking the Grace-minded Gospel of John.” [*From Wikipedia](#)

A Brief History of the controversy

“The first known use of the term “lordship salvation” occurred in a 1959 debate in *Eternity* magazine between Presbyterian Everett F. Harrison, a professor at Fuller Theological Seminary, and John Stott, an Anglican theologian. The controversy moved to the forefront of the evangelical world in the late 1980s when Calvinist John F. MacArthur argued against the doctrine of carnal Christianity in his book *The Gospel According to Jesus*. In response, in 1989, Charles Ryrie published *So Great Salvation* and Zane C. Hodges published *Absolutely Free! A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation*. Both MacArthur’s and Hodges’s books were published by Zondervan. MacArthur later published *Faith Works* (1993) and Hodges released a second edition of his earlier title, *The Gospel Under Siege* in 1989.” [*From Wikipedia](#)

In August of 2004 John MacArthur’s broadcast called “Grace to You” was booted off of BBN (Bible Broadcasting Network) for teaching what they call “Election/Hyper-Calvinism” which they claim has brought much confusion to their listeners. This was all a part of the issue related to the “Lordship Salvation Controversy.” Much can be read about this on line by keying in “Lordship Salvation Debate” on Google.

Comments from key individuals supporting “Free Grace theology”

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

On the issue of sin – “Sin is not an issue for mankind. Christ already took care of the sin issue for mankind by His death on the cross. Therefore Christ’s substitutionary death is not an essential part of the gospel message.”

On the issue of eternal life – “Since lack of eternal life is the issue (as sin has already been dealt with), mortal man must believe that Christ is the guarantor of eternal life.”

Charles Ryrie from his book "Balancing the Christian Life" in the context of answering the question "must there be a commitment to Christ as Lord of one's life in order to be saved?" writes: "The message of faith only, and the message of faith plus commitment of life cannot both be the gospel; therefore one of them is a false gospel and comes under the curse of perverting the gospel or preaching another gospel (Gal 1:6-9); and this is a very serious matter. As far as sanctification is concerned, if only committed people are saved people, then where is there room for carnal Christians? Or if willingness alone is required at the moment of salvation, to what extent is this willingness necessary?"

Website comments from those supporting "Free Grace theology"

From: <http://free-grace.blogspot.com/>

Quotations from Charlie Bing

"I think that the current debate in Free Grace theology is causing the Checklist Evangelism side to become increasingly polarized in their understanding and position. I have argued before on this blog that there is no basis for assurance in objective Scriptural passages for the converts of Checklist evangelism, for there is (are) no passage(s) that precisely state the same things they are requiring the lost to do to have eternal life. But equally, the most beloved evangelistic verses taken from the Gospel of John are disappearing from their discussions at a very rapid rate. I have written a post arguing that Checklist Evangelism robs the Free Grace world of the single most fruitful passage in evangelism, John 3:16: What does believing in Jesus really mean? What is "believing in" Jesus shorthand for? What is the specific content of that belief? In a nutshell, according to the context, "believing in Jesus" means believing that Jesus gives me eternal life and I will not perish, or equally, trusting in Jesus for eternal life and deliverance from perishing. Essentially, "believing in Jesus" is entrusting one's eternal destiny to Him; it is certain reliance upon Him for the promised result. It really is this simple, and as such lies unencumbered by any additional caveats or qualifications."

From website "scriptureunlocked.com" Basics of Free Grace Theology by Rene Lopez (Lopez studied under Zane Hodges): "The ultimate goal of the Holy Spirit's work in the believer's life is to produce spiritual maturity reflected in consistent Christlike behavior and attitudes (*Galatians 5:22-25; Luke 14:25-33; Colossians 1:23-29*). Therefore, obedience to the Word of God, while not necessary for obtaining eternal salvation from hell, is the essential responsibility of each Christian (*Romans 6:12-23; Hebrews 5:13,14; 1 Corinthians 2:14-3:4*). However, the Bible does not teach that this obedience will be manifested in all believers. If a believer does not yield to the ministry of the Holy Spirit in his experience, failure will result, evidenced by sinful acts or even prolonged disobedience (*1 Corinthians 10:1-13; Galatians 5:16-21*)."

"*But what then is faith in Jesus?* Simple faith in Christ is intellectual assent. Stripped of its pejorative connotation, intellectual assent, or agreement, is a good definition of what faith is. Do you believe that Abraham Lincoln help change the slave policy in the United States? There is nothing you do as a result of believing this. You either believe or you do not."

From website "Jesus-is-Savior.com" Tara Tourangeau writes: "There is not some "special kind" of faith to be employed but rather the saving power of faith resides not in itself but always and ever in faith's object. If Christ is the Object of faith, that faith is able to save and does indeed save. Therefore what the Lordship Salvation doctrine has done is add a singularly Christian requirement to saving faith. The unsaved are thus shut out from His divine grace and the saved are shut out from His blessed assurance."

From website "scriptureunlocked.com" Rene Lopez writes on the argument that turning from sins is not faith and thus isn't a condition of eternal life: "Let's take a key example. Luke 13:3, 5: "Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." According to this way of thinking Jesus was saying, "Unless you change your minds about Me, that is, unless you believe in Me, you will all likewise be eternally condemned." However, this passage, like many others of the like, does not refer to eternal condemnation by using the word *perish* but to temporal death that will come upon the specific group and ultimately the nation if Christ's words are not heeded. Thus Luke 13:3, 5 really means, "Unless you

repent, you will all likewise perish.” According to this view Jesus was saying, “Unless you turn from your sinning and come into fellowship with God, you will all likewise experience premature physical death.”

Writing on the argument that perseverance in faith and good works is not a condition of eternal life the same author writes: “Many people believe only those who persevere in faith and good works will receive eternal life. Basic Free Grace Theology denies this. Free Grace advocates believe that failure, even major failure, is possible in the Christian life. *First Corinthians 3:3* shows that by looking at the works of some believers, one cannot distinguish them from unbelievers. *First Corinthians 5:1-5* shows how the works of some believers are actually worse than the works of some unbelievers (see 1 Cor 5:10-11 and 6:8-11). *First Corinthians 11:30* and James 5:19-20 and 2 Tim 2:11-13 show that many believers do not persevere and die physically prematurely. Perseverance is not guaranteed and it is not a condition of eternal life.”

Writing on the argument that good works are not indispensable for eternal life the same author writes: “If persevering is a requirement for getting eternal life, and if one cannot be sure until death that he will persevere, then we can never be sure of our eternal destiny as long as we remain alive. That is a horrible and defeating feeling.

We believe that the only condition of assurance is by believing the good news that Jesus guarantees eternal life to all who simply believe in Him. In John 11:26 Jesus asked Martha, “Do you believe this?” She said “Yes, Lord.” She didn’t look to her works. She didn’t wonder about her future works or whether she would persevere in the future or not. She knew that didn’t impact her belief or her eternal life.”

Writing on the argument that Eternal Life and eternal rewards must be distinguished by noting that the former is a gift and the latter is earned the same author writes: “While everyone who believes in Christ receives eternal life as a free gift, rewards in the future are based on faith and works. While believers are responsible for their rewards, even rewards are based on God’s grace; for God even provides the means and aid in attaining these rewards, and in the end He does not owe anyone anything but gives it out of mercy (see Matt 20:1-16; 25:14-30; Luke 19:12-27; Rom 11:35).”

A Summary of Free Grace Theology from Zane Hodges book *Absolutely Free*:

- Repentance is not essential to the gospel message. In no sense is repentance related to saving faith (Zane Hodges, *Absolutely Free*, 144-46).
- Faith is a human act, not a gift from God (AF 219). It occurs in a decisive moment but does not necessarily continue (AF xiv, 107). True faith can be subverted, be overthrown, collapse, or even turn to unbelief (AF 111).
- To “believe” unto salvation is to believe the facts of the gospel (AF 37-39). “Trusting Jesus” means believing the “saving facts” about Him (AF 39), and to believe those facts is to appropriate the gift of eternal life (AF 40). Those who add any suggestion of commitment have departed from the New Testament idea of salvation (AF 27).
- Spiritual fruit is not guaranteed in the Christian life (AF 73-75, 119). Some Christians spend their lives in a barren wasteland of defeat, confusion, and every kind of evil (AF 119-25).
- Heaven is guaranteed to believers (AF 112) but Christian victory is not (AF 118-19). One could even say “the saved” still need salvation (AF 195-99). Christ offers a whole range of postconversion deliverance experiences to supply what Christians lack (AF 196). But these other “salvations” all require the addition of human works, such as obedience, submission, and confession of Jesus as Lord (AF 74, 119, 124-25, 196). Thus God is dependent to some degree on human effort in achieving deliverance from sin in this life (AF 220).
- Submission is not in any sense a condition for eternal life (AF 172). “Calling on the Lord” means appealing to Him, not submitting to Him (AF 193-95).
- Nothing guarantees that a true Christian will love God (AF 130-31). Salvation does not necessarily even place the sinner in a right relationship of harmonious fellowship with God (AF 145-60).

- If people are sure they believe, their faith must be genuine (AF 31). All who claim Christ by faith as Savior--even those involved in serious or prolonged sin--should be assured that they belong to God come what may (AF 32, 93-95). It is dangerous and destructive to question the salvation of professing Christians (AF 18-19, 91-99). The New Testament writers never questioned the reality of their readers' faith (AF 98).
- It is possible to experience a moment of faith that guarantees heaven for eternity (AF 107), then to turn away permanently and live a life that is utterly barren of any spiritual fruit (AF 118-19). Genuine believers might even cease to name the name of Christ or confess Christianity (AF 111).

Looking at the arguments and Scriptures used to support “Free Grace Theology”

- The entire book of Acts fails to reveal a single passage where people are pressed to acknowledge Jesus Christ as their personal Lord in order to be saved.
- Salvation is distinguished from discipleship and makes requirements for discipleship separate from salvation. Our Lord distinguished the two (Luke 14:16-33) as two separate things.
- Christ did not require the Samaritan woman to set her sinful life in order, or even be willing to, so that she could be saved. He did not set out before her what would be expected by way of changes in her life if she believed. He simply said she needed to know who He is and to ask for the gift of eternal life (John 4:10).
- Christ guarantees everlasting life to those who are convinced that He fulfills that promise – that is to everyone who simply believes in Him (John 6:47).
- Being a Christian means following an invitation, whereas being a disciple means forsaking everything. To confuse these two aspects of the Christian life is to confound the grace of God and the works of man, and to not distinguish the difference between salvation and sanctification.
- The gospel of John is the only book of the Bible written to non-Christians, and it significantly does not use the term "repentance." Therefore repentance is not a requirement for eternal life, only faith in Christ.
- Within the Free Grace movement there is some dispute over what is the essential content of saving faith. One side holds faith in Jesus of the Bible is sufficient for eternal life. The other side holds that one must believe in at least some of the following theological truths: death, burial, resurrection, and/or deity of Christ.

Scriptures listed to support “Free Grace Theology”

- John 1:12. "But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name;"
- John 3:16; 3:18; 3:36; 4:10; 5:24; 6:29; 6:35; 6:37; 6:40; 6:47; 6:63; 7:38-39; 8:24; 17:3; 20:29; 20:31;
- Matthew 9:2. "And, behold, they brought to him a man sick of the palsy, lying on a bed: and Jesus seeing their faith said unto the sick of the palsy; Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee."
- Mark 2:5; 5:36; Luk 7:50; Rom 3:27-28; 4:5; 5:1; 10:9; Gal 2:16; Eph 2:8-9; Col 2:20-23.

Comments from key individuals supporting “Lordship Salvation”

John MacArthur from his book “The Gospel According to Jesus” writes: “Listen to the typical gospel presentation nowadays. You’ll hear sinners entreated with words like, ‘accept Jesus Christ as personal Savior’; ‘ask Jesus into your heart’; invite Christ into your life’; or ‘make a decision for Christ.’” You may be so accustomed to hearing those phrases that it will surprise you to learn none of them is based on biblical terminology. They are the products of a diluted gospel. It is not the gospel according to Jesus. The gospel Jesus proclaimed was a call to discipleship, a call to follow Him in submissive obedience, not just a plea to make a decision or pray a prayer. Jesus message liberated people from the bondage of their sin while it confronted and condemned hypocrisy.”

J I Packer writing about “the Gospel According to Jesus” writes: “God has joined faith and repentance as the two facets of response to the Savior and made it clear that turning to Christ means turning from sin and letting ungodliness go. Biblical teaching on faith joins credence, commitment, and communion; it exhibits Christian believing as not only knowing facts about Christ, but also coming to Him in personal trust to worship, love, and serve Him. If we fail to keep together these things that God has joined together, our Christianity will be distorted. ‘Lordship salvation’ is a name for the view that upholds these unities.”

James Montgomery Boice writing about “the Gospel According to Jesus” writes: “What does it mean to be a Christian? His (MacArthur’s) answers address themselves to what I consider to be the greatest weakness of contemporary evangelical Christianity in America. Did I say weakness? It is more. It is a tragic error. It is the idea – where did it ever come from? – that one can be a Christian without being a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ. It reduces the gospel to the mere fact of Christ’s having died for sinners, requires of sinners only that they acknowledge this by the barest intellectual assent, and then assures them of the eternal security when they may very well not be born again. This view bends faith beyond recognition- at least for those who know what the Bible says about faith – and promises a false peace to thousand who have given verbal assent to this reductionist Christianity but are not truly in God’s family.”

John Piper in his book *The Pleasures of God* – “So often you find in many churches and ministries the cultivation of an implicit two-stage Christianity: a faith stage and then (maybe) an obedience stage. But this is not the way the Bible pictures the life of faith. The separation of faith and obedience, as though faith were necessary for salvation and obedience were optional, is a mistake owing to a misunderstanding of what faith really is. True saving faith is not the kind of belief in the facts of the gospel that leaves the heart and life unchanged.”

Bruce Demarest and John Feinberg write in their book *The Cross and Salvation*: “We conclude that for conversion to be authentic and transforming, pre-Christians must make the Lord Jesus Christ the object of their exclusive loyalty. This means that to the best of their knowledge penitents will forsake all known vice and cling to the Savior as their only hope of salvation. Genuine conversion will thus involve sincere repentance, total commitment to Christ, and submission to the Lord’s sovereign rule. We are not saying faith plus works saves; we simply invite an honest assessment of what biblical conversion involves.”

Looking at the arguments and Scriptures used to support “Lordship Salvation”

- Faith is a wholehearted trust in Christ personally (Gal. 2:16 ; Phil. 3:9). Not merely faith about Him; faith in Him.
- Those who have true faith will love Christ (Rom. 8:28 ; 1 Cor. 16:22 ; 1 John 4:19), and will want to do His bidding. Such a person may sin, but not continue to defy His authority and pursue what Christ hates.
- Surrender to God is the true believers highest joy, because he has become a new creation (2 Cor 5:17).
- The faith that saves commitment does not mean the person leads a perfect life. But commitment to Christ does mean that obedience rather than disobedience will be the trend of the life. The Christian life is a struggle (Phi 2:12-13; Gal 5:17). God’s love to His own becomes chastening when necessary (Heb. 12:5-11). When there is sin, the true person of faith confesses sin and comes to the Father for forgiveness (1 John 1:9).
- Christians that have saving faith are first of all “born again.” John 6:44 states that no one can come to Christ unless the Father draws him. This fits with the Scriptures teaching on total depravity (Eph 2:1; Rom 3:11). Therefore no one could believe in the first place unless God Himself deals in effectual grace. This is exactly what is meant in Eph 2:8-9. Faith is a gift from God on the basis of grace. The concept missing in Arminian theology (the Free Grace Theology) is the transformation of the “New Birth” (John 3:5-8; Jer 31:31-34; Ez 36:25-27). The point being that this and only this is true saving faith, and when true saving faith is present it is a life transforming work.

- The Free Grace Theologians claim the Gospel of John does not address repentance, and addresses faith as though it can come in any form, type, or degree. However, it is the Gospel of John that addresses the necessity of the “New Birth” (John 3:5-7); the reality of the necessity of God’s sovereign calling (John 6:44; 65); that not every kind of faith is sufficient (John 2:23-24; 8:30-31). In fact the idea of being “set free” in John 8:32 means to be set free from the dominion of sin & the old self – thus obedience with repentance. The entire writing of John’s first epistle is delineating the difference between profession and true saving faith (1st John 3:9).
- The sinner's act of faith is not the main issue in the lordship controversy. The real debate is with what God does in redeeming the elect. Is the person claiming faith really born again? (John 3:3, 7 ; 1 Peter 1:3 , 23)? Is the old self "crucified ... and no longer serving as a slave to sin" (Rom. 6:6)? Does the person have a new nature? (2 Pet. 1:4 ; 2 Cor. 5:17)? Is the faith of such the person can now say they are slaves to righteousness (Rom. 6:18)?
- The Arminian approach to faith is sadly fostering a faith in one’s faith, not in the transforming power of Christ alone and with it a complete submission to Christ as the Lord of life.
- Free Grace Theology proponents take their strength from claiming to be champions of grace. However, their type of grace is anemic. Titus 3:5 further eliminates the Arminian ideas of grace – that man obligates God via man’s exercise of profession without possession which is suppose to assure man of glory while leaving man locked in his sin. No, salvation--all of it--is "not on the basis of deeds which we have done" (including our profession or faith in our faith). It is God's work, done "according to His mercy." It is not merely a declaratory transaction, legally promising a place in heaven while the sinner is left captive to sin. It involves a transformation of the nature, through "the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit" – thus transforming the life!
- Repentance is essential to the Gospel. As man in Adam is hopelessly lost in sin, a change is required with conversion (1 Thess. 1:9). Paul's evangelism always demanded conversion: "God is now declaring to men that all everywhere should repent" (Acts 17:30). Repentance is what leads to life (Acts 11:18) and to the knowledge of the truth (2 Tim. 2:25). Thus salvation is impossible apart from repentance.
- The claim that repentance was not part of John’s Gospel is refuted throughout John by the change in life implied (John 3:36; 8:11; 10:4-5; 17:16; 21:15-17). Repentance is not a prerequisite of Salvation, it is a component of the new birth, and is demonstrated as a part of the persons faith.

How do “Free Grace Theology” advocates deal with 1st John? In Zane Hodges commentary on 1st John he describes the purpose of the letter “It warns against the dangers of false teaching and exhorts believers to lives of obedience to God and love for their brothers and sisters.” To further understand this twist his commentary on 1st John 3:9 is given: “In so far as God is experienced by a believer, that experience is sinless....The ‘new man’ or new self; Eph 4:24; Col 3:10) is an absolutely perfect new creation. By insisting on this point, John was seeking to refute a false conception about sin. Sin is not, nor ever can be, anything but satanic. It can never spring from what a Christian truly is at the level of his regenerate being.” Hodge’s is saying the meaning of the text is not a contrast between the regenerate and unregenerate person, but a point being made by John that sin cannot originate in the new birth side of the believer, and therefore sin is never the believers friend (related to difference between a carnal & spiritual Christian). By contrast here is what I believe 1st John is about - 1st John is not about exhorting believers to lives of obedience, it is about the reality of salvation – whether one has it or not (1st John 5:13), a test as such – how can one know they have eternal life or what is the basis of assurance? The basis of assurance is not faith in my faith. It is the evidence in me of a transformed life. Many people profess to be Christians but are not. The epistle of 1st John provides the answer to the genuineness of any persons salvation by providing contrasts based on the reality of the evidence of true salvation (eternal life) in the recipient, as contrasted with the evidence of the unsaved. In 1st John 3:9 John is drawing clear lines between those who practice sin as a life style and the true Christian. The true Christian has turned (repented) from sin. This is one of the means of knowing who is of God and who is not.