

The Free Grace Movement and Perseverance

INTRODUCTION

Every true Christian desires to “strive for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb 12:14), to “walk in a manner worthy of the Lord” (Col 1:10), to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet 3:18), and to “be purified as he is pure” (1 John 3:3). “Please, tell me,” we hear our children, our students, and our fellow Christians pleading, “How do I grow; how do I become more like Christ?” Theologians have sought to answer this question regarding spiritual growth in various ways. Following the pattern first laid out in *Five Views on Sanctification*, there are generally five schools of sanctification teaching: Wesleyan, Keswick, Pentecostal, Chaferian, and Reformed (see the appendix for diagrams of these five schools).¹ Each of these views has particular points of emphasis, especially related to the initiation of sanctification (e.g. does God begin His work of producing fruit immediately after regeneration or does He wait for man to begin the process?) and the degree to which God and man are involved in the ongoing growth of the Christian. Indeed, a major challenge in this whole enterprise is balancing the Scripture’s teaching about the indicatives and imperatives related to progressive sanctification. An overemphasis in either direction can result in legalism or moralism if the imperatives become the focus or antinomianism and quietism if the indicatives take center stage.

Sadly, in recent years three streams of antinomian teaching have come to light, and amazingly, they flow out of three different models of sanctification teaching. Pouring out of Pentecostalism is hyper grace teaching.² Reformed and Lutheran circles have produced a

¹Melvin Dieter, ed., *Five Views on Sanctification* (Zondervan, 1987). This book uses these five categories but labels one the “Augustinian-Dispensational View.” This unhelpful label used by John F. Walvoord, who penned that chapter, was called the “Chaferian” view by Charles Ryrie, “Contrasting Views on Sanctification,” in *Walvoord: A Tribute* (ed. Donald K. Campbell; Moody Press, 1982), 189–200, and this is the preferable term.

The diagrams in the appendix are slight modifications taken from the helpful overview of each of the models provided by Andrew D. Naselli, *No Quick Fix: Where Higher Life Theology Came From, What It Is, and Why It’s Harmful* (Lexham Press, 2017), 7–27. Another excellent historical survey is found in William W. Combs, “The Disjunction Between Justification and Sanctification in Contemporary Evangelical Theology,” *DBSJ* 6 (Fall 2001): 17–33.

²Michael L. Brown, *Hyper-Grace: Exposing the Dangers of the Modern Grace Message* (Charisma House, 2014); Vinson Synan, ed., *The Truth about Grace* (Charisma House, 2018).

form of antinomianism represented in the writing of Tullian Tchividjian and The Boys.³ And the third stream comes out of the Chaferian model of sanctification: Free Grace theology. In this essay I would like to discuss this third stream of antinomian teaching, because the Free Grace teachers have taken some unique (even extreme?) views with regard to sanctification, particularly in relation to perseverance. But before I jump into that end of the pool with you, it is important that we first understand the contents of the pool—what is the Free Grace movement, who are its proponents, and what do these proponents believe? Once we have considered these important background issues related to the Free Grace movement, I would like to discuss the Free Grace position regarding perseverance, assurance, and the necessity of spiritual growth in the lives of believers.⁴

The History, Beliefs, and Theologians of the Free Grace Movement

The Free Grace movement officially began with the establishment of the Grace Evangelical Society (www.faithalone.org) in 1986. Its stated purpose: “to promote the clear proclamation of God’s free salvation through faith alone in Christ alone, which is properly

³Mark Jones, *Antinomianism: Reformed Theology’s Unwelcome Guest?* (P & R Publishing, 2013). This is a difficult group to label since it is still in its formative stage. This group’s leaders do not like to be called antinomian (and they would be correct if I were using this term in its actual historical sense), but for lack of anything better this term seems the best way to describe the group’s anti-law orientation. Other suggested names are either too pejorative (e.g. “celebratory failurism,” the name given by Jen Wilkin, “Failure is not a Virtue,” [May 1, 2014] <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/failure-is-not-a-virtue/>) (accessed 7/31/2019), too narrow (e.g. “radical Lutheranism,” so named by Gerhard O. Forde, *A More Radical Gospel: Essays on Eschatology, Authority, Atonement, and Ecumenism* [ed. Mark C. Mattes and Steven D. Paulson; Eerdmans, 2004], 7 [note: this chapter is a reprint of an essay that first appeared as “Radical Lutheranism: Lutheran Identity in America,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 1 (1987): 5–18], or too general (e.g. “confessionalism,” the self-appointed label of “The Boys,” *A Primer on Pietism: Its Characteristics and Inevitable Impact on the Christian Life* [Theocast, Inc., 2017]). See Tullian Tchividjian, *Jesus + Nothing = Everything* (Crossway, 2011) and idem, *One Way Love* (David C. Cook, 2013). The Boys, a group of Nashville pastors have also published *A Pilgrim’s Guide to Rest* (Theocast, Inc., 2018).

⁴In using such terms as perseverance and assurance, I am assuming some basic definitions related to this whole field of inquiry. So here is how I am defining some of the terms used in this essay: *justification* refers to the time when someone believes and is declared righteous before God; *sanctification* to the progress of spiritual growth in the life of the believer; *perseverance* to the believer’s continuation in good works until the end of one’s earthly life; *preservation/eternal security* to God’s work of preserving a person who has believed in Christ for eternal life; *assurance* to the subjective awareness of one’s salvation; *legalism/moralism* to the error of self-effort apart from God’s help with the goal of gaining favor from God in our sanctification; and *antinomianism* to the ceasing or denial of personal effort in the work of sanctification.

correlated with and distinguished from issues related to discipleship.”⁵ In order to carry out this purpose the society produces monthly newsletters (*Grace in Focus* [bi-monthly, 48-page magazine] and *Partners in Grace* [monthly, 2-page newsletter]), a biannual Journal, regional and national conferences, production of ministry tools such as tracts and follow-up materials, and having representatives of GES speak at churches, seminars, and retreats.

In 2004 a daughter organization, the Free Grace Alliance (www.freegracealliance.com), was established. Like the Grace Evangelical Society, FGA sought “to promote the clear proclamation of God’s free salvation through faith alone in Christ alone.”⁶ However, the group of leaders who initiated the start of FGA felt the need to provide “leadership and connection,” ingredients they thought were missing from GES.⁷ But in 2006, Zane Hodges “delivered a message at the GES National Conference in which he promoted the idea that the cross and resurrection of Christ were not part of the necessary information that people need to believe in order to be born again.”⁸ While Hodges desired to encourage people to focus on this aspect of the gospel presentation in evangelizing, many Free Grace advocates disagreed with this approach because they believed that the person and work of Christ, and not just the promise of eternal life to those who believe, is and should be presented as at the core of the gospel message. This distinction created a division between the two organizations initially, though there appears to be a softening in recent years as Hawley states, “Many people are involved in some sense with both organizations. Personally, while I am more doctrinally at home with FGA, I happily attend the GES conferences and have encouraging fellowship with them.”⁹

Any movement has precursors, and I would like to point out three in particular that contributed to the theology promoted by the Free Grace movement today. **First**, a 1959 article in *Eternity* magazine pitted Everett F. Harrison (a Dallas Seminary graduate and former professor) against John R. Stott (a noted British pastor and author) as they debated the question, “Must Christ be Lord to be Savior?” Harrison took the “No” position and Stott

⁵Arthur L. Farstad, “An Introduction to Grace Evangelical Society and Its Journal,” *JGES* 1 (Autumn 1988): 4. Farstad was the editor of *JGES* until his death in 1998. Robert Wilkin then served as editor from 1998–2013. Ken Yates has served as editor since 2014.

⁶See <https://freegracealliance.com/history/>. Accessed 7/31/2019.

⁷In a personal email (dated January 21, 2019) written in response to my question about the differences between the GES and FGA, one of the members of FGA’s board of directors, Grant Hawley, expanded on the focus of FGA: “Our focus is not to compete with GES, but to connect and encourage Free Grace people and ministries to share grace graciously.”

⁸Hawley, personal email. I am referencing his explanation of the state of the differences between the two organizations throughout the present paragraph.

⁹Hawley, personal email. In the interests of full disclosure I also received a personal email from Ken Yates of the Grace Evangelical Society (dated 1/22/2019) responding to the same question I sent to Hawley. Yates was not as warm toward FGA as Hawley was toward the GES, pointing to at least five areas of disagreement between the two groups. I’m just an outsider, but could it be that the mother organization (GES) is not warm toward the group that left (FGA) because their efforts are now divided?

the “Yes” position.¹⁰ In actuality, the article was not that helpful because of the way the question was phrased. Grudem suggests it would have been much better if the questions had been, “Is repentance from sin a necessary part of saving faith?” and “Will good works and continuing to believe necessarily follow from saving faith?”¹¹ Of course, this idea of Lordship Salvation would be at the center of a controversy creating a huge firestorm of books and articles in the late 80s and early 90s.

Second, ten years later in 1969 Charles Ryrie entered the fray by entitling one of the chapters in his *Balancing the Christian Life*, “Must Christ be Lord to be Savior?”¹² His answer? No! Bill Combs considers Ryrie’s conclusion in the chapter as drawing “a line in the sand between the lordship and non-lordship views.”¹³ Unfortunately, one can already see hints of the kind of inflammatory rhetoric that would permeate the Lordship Salvation controversy two decades later in Ryrie’s evaluation of the chapter’s question: “The importance of this question cannot be overestimated in relation to both salvation and sanctification. 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.”¹⁴

Third, and certainly the most significant influence on the Free Grace movement was the teaching and writing of Professor Zane Hodges (1932–2008), who taught for 27 years at Dallas Theological Seminary from 1959–1986. Hodges may be otherwise known for his work on the Majority Text of the Greek New Testament. He was likely the most significant supporter of the majority text position since John Burgon of the late 19th century. And he teamed with Arthur Farstad in producing the first Greek New Testament based on the majority text.¹⁵ But he has arguably had a much more significant influence in the evangelical world as the aggressive promoter of Free Grace ideas in his role as a professor. Wayne Grudem accurately describes the situation: “Although only a minority of Dallas Seminary professors held a Free Grace view, Zane Hodges was an exceptionally persuasive teacher, and every year some students adopted his view. Then, through these students, the Free Grace movement gained a remarkable worldwide influence, especially in discouraging Christians from including any explicit call to repentance in their presentations of the gospel.”¹⁶ Prior to the start of GES, Hodges had already penned several books advocating Free Grace theology (e.g. *The Hungry Inherit* [1972], *The Gospel Under Siege* [1981], and

¹⁰“Must Christ Be Lord to Be Savior? No . . . Yes,” *Eternity* 10.9 (September 1959): 13–18, 36–37, 48.

¹¹Wayne Grudem, “Free Grace” *Theology: 5 Ways It Diminishes the Gospel* (Crossway, 2016), 22–23, n. 23. Of course, hindsight is always 20/20; no one could have predicted back in 1959 that these issues would lead to an entire theological school of thought. Also see, William Combs, “The Disjunction Between Justification and Sanctification in Contemporary Evangelical Theology,” *DBSJ* 6 (Fall 2001): 30.

¹²Charles Ryrie, *Balancing the Christian Life* (Moody Press, 1969), 169–81.

¹³Combs, 30–31. And I agree with Combs.

¹⁴Ryrie, *Balancing*, 170.

¹⁵Zane C. Hodges and Arthur L. Farstad, eds., *The Greek New Testament According to the Majority Text* (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

¹⁶Grudem, “Free Grace” *Theology*, 22.

Grace in Eclipse [1985]). His contribution to the Lordship debate was *Absolutely Free! A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation* (1989). He also penned commentaries on James (1994), the epistles of John (1999), and Hebrews (in the *Bible Knowledge Commentary* [1983]). Shortly before his death he published *Six Secrets to the Christian Life* (2004). Following his death commentaries based on his class notes were published on 1 Peter (2017), 2 Peter (2015), Jude (2016), and Romans (2013). Indeed, Hodges influence on Free Grace theology can hardly be overstated (at least 30 of his publications are for sale on the GES website).

Significant leaders of Free Grace theology besides Hodges include Earl Radmacher (1931–2014), Arthur Farstad (1935–1998), Robert Wilkin, Charles Bing, Joseph (Jody) Dillow, David Anderson, Shawn Lazar, Ken Yates, and Fred Chay.

Though I have already hinted at a few of the main concerns of Free Grace advocates, it will be helpful to consider their specific theological viewpoints.

Perhaps this audience has heard the Free Grace position described as *easy believeism* or *anti-lordship* or *non-lordship* or *faith alone*. While some of these appellations are fair, I am choosing to use the term this group prefers when describing itself. The *great* concern that Free Grace advocates have is that God asks nothing more of us than faith when he justifies us. Specifically, what they mean by faith alone is that no other human actions can be said to accompany faith. Thus, they would argue that it is wrong to suggest that repentance from sin must accompany faith or to say that any other good works must necessarily result from faith, including the need to continue in believing.¹⁷ Grudem summarizes four pastoral practices that flow from the Free Grace concept of “justification by faith *alone*.” 1) Evangelistic messages should generally not include a call to repentance, i.e. a call for an inward resolve to turn away from sin. 2) We need to give assurance to people who deny their faith after sincerely believing in Christ at one time because they are likely to still be saved, and we can assure them that they are saved. 3) A professing Christian who persists in sinful conduct should not ordinarily be warned that they may not be saved; rather, we should say that the person is foolishly missing the point that they must be who they are in Christ. 4) We need not ordinarily give assurance of salvation to people based on their continued good works because their testimony of belief is sufficient to give assurance.¹⁸

Some might try to explain Free Grace theology by pointing to the Lordship Salvation controversy and equating the beliefs of non-lordship advocates with the Free Grace position. Before responding to this perception, which I believe is an incorrect assessment of the situation, I need to provide a bit of background to the “Lordship Salvation” controversy as it came to be described in popular parlance. Earlier I mentioned the *Eternity* magazine

¹⁷Grudem, “*Free Grace*” *Theology*, 20. Bob Wilkin, Executive Director of GES, directly states in a video on the home page of the GES website (accessed 7/31/2019 – <https://faithalone.org/>) that the Free Grace movement denies perseverance, which he defines as continuing in faith and good works to the end of one’s life. Rather, he argues, the only thing necessary for someone to be saved is the need to believe. Notice that for Free Grace thinkers justification and perseverance have no connection at all. The moment we suggest that sanctification is inevitably or necessarily tied to justification such that all true believers will persevere, we have added to faith and have therefore taken the “free” away from “grace.”

¹⁸Grudem, “*Free Grace*” *Theology*, 21.

article and the chapter in Ryrie's *Balancing the Christian Life*, both of which introduced the lordship language that came to be used.¹⁹ But it was John MacArthur's *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Zondervan, 1988) that led to a number of responses, both for and against the idea.²⁰ Perhaps the most famous among the negative responders were Zane Hodges, *Absolutely Free! A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation* (Zondervan, 1989) and Charles Ryrie, *So Great Salvation: What it Means to Believe in Jesus Christ* (Victory Books, 1989). Positive responses included *Christ the Lord*, ed. Michael Horton (Baker, 1992) and Kenneth Gentry, *Lord of the Saved: Getting to the Heart of the Lordship Debate* (Presbyterian & Reformed, 1992). Further insight into the controversy could also be gained by reading three essays on the subject by MacArthur, Earl Radmacher, and Robert Saucy in the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*.²¹ There never was a resolution to the Lordship Salvation controversy. Both groups staked their claims on either side of this basic issue: "the gospel summons sinners to yield to Christ's authority."²² I suppose it would take a bibliography of several pages to list all of the book reviews of *The Gospel According to Jesus* so I will not attempt to do so here, but even after 30 years, the book continues to remain in print (it is now in its third edition), an amazing statistic for a non-academic Christian book.²³

To return to our discussion of Free Grace theology and its relation to the "Lordship Salvation controversy," the question remains, "Is a 'nonlordship' position a key element of Free Grace theology?" Will it be helpful if I answer "well, yes and no"? Do all Free Grace teachers disagree with the main thrust of *The Gospel According to Jesus*? Absolutely. But there are many other theologians, perhaps Charles Ryrie as the most significant among them, who disagree with the main thrust of the book but who also disagree with Free Grace theology.²⁴ Thus, we cannot refer to Lordship Salvation as a key element of Free Grace theology. Another reason I will not make a connection between nonlordship belief and Free

¹⁹Also see G. Michael Cocoris, *Lordship Salvation—Is it Biblical?* (Redención Viva, 1983), but I do not think many people were aware of this book before MacArthur cited it in his book (John MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus* [Zondervan, 1988], 29, n. 21).

²⁰See Combs, "Disjunction," 31–32; and Grudem, "Free Grace" Theology, 22–23 for a listing of many of the significant responses.

²¹John F. MacArthur, Jr., "Faith According to the Apostle James," *JETS* 33 (March 1990): 13–34; Earl D. Radmacher, "First Response to 'Faith According to the Apostle James' by John F. MacArthur, Jr.," *JETS* 33 (March 1990): 35–41; Robert L. Saucy, "Second Response to 'Faith According to the Apostle James' by John F. MacArthur, Jr.," *JETS* 33 (March 1990): 43–47.

²²MacArthur, "Faith According to James," 13. This is MacArthur's summary of *The Gospel According to Jesus* to which he refers in the first paragraph of the essay. To be clear the "Lordship" advocates would agree with this simple assertion and the "no-Lordship" advocates would strongly oppose it.

²³I especially commend two reviews of *The Gospel According to Jesus*: Darrell L. Bock, "A Review of *The Gospel According to Jesus*," *BSac* 146 (January-March 1989): 21–40; and Homer A. Kent, "Review Article: *The Gospel According to Jesus*," *GTJ* 10 (Spring 1989): 67–77.

²⁴I believe that it is fair to say that those who disagree with "Lordship Salvation" and who also disagree with Free Grace theology would identify with the Chaferian or Keswick models of sanctification, but I do not have the space to go down this rabbit trail.

Grace theology is that the whole “Lordship Salvation” language is too imprecise and unhelpful. First, John MacArthur himself disliked the term, choosing to use it only because it had become a familiar phrase in evangelicalism at the time he wrote.²⁵ Second, when the question is formed around the proposition that some people say you need only to accept Jesus as Savior but not as Lord, neither side would win or lose. The Free Grace supporters would say that Jesus is Lord over the entire universe and over our lives, even though we may not perfectly submit to his lordship.²⁶ On the other hand, non-Free Grace people would agree that our submission to Christ’s lordship is never perfectly realized in this life.²⁷

Earlier I spoke of the central concern of the Free Grace movement related to the concept of “justification by faith alone.” And I think Wayne Grudem’s assessment of how this statement is understood by all Free Grace advocates gets us to the heart of their theology²⁸: 1) *whether repentance from sin (in the sense of remorse for sin and an internal resolve to forsake it) is necessary for saving faith*; and 2) *whether good works and continuing to believe necessarily follow from saving faith*. Historic Protestantism would argue positively for both of these propositions and Free Grace advocates would take a negative view of them.

In addition to these two main concerns I find four additional ideas that come up in the Free Grace literature again and again. 1) Warnings about apostasy (such as those found in Hebrews) pertain to believers and the potential loss of reward, i.e., true believers can apostatize.²⁹ 2) Salvation in James speaks of preservation from physical death rather than spiritual death.³⁰ 3) Assurance of salvation is objective rather than subjective; this means that emphasis is placed upon the objective promises of eternal security rather than upon subjective evidences such as good works or the internal witness of the Spirit.³¹ 4) There must be a clear separation between justification and progressive sanctification.³²

Before considering the issues of perseverance, assurance, and the necessity of spiritual growth as these concepts relate to Free Grace theology, I believe it would be

²⁵MacArthur, *Gospel According to Jesus*, 28–29 n. 20: “I don’t like the term ‘lordship salvation.’ It was coined by those who want to eliminate the idea of submission to Christ from the call to saving faith, and it implies that Jesus’ lordship is a false addition to the gospel. As we shall see, however, ‘lordship salvation’ is simply the biblical and historic doctrine of soteriology. I use the term in this volume only for the sake of argument.”

²⁶Charles C. Bing, *Lordship Salvation: A Biblical Evaluation and Response*. Grace Life Edition (GraceLife Ministries, 1992), 167. Cf. Grudem, “Free Grace” Theology, 23.

²⁷MacArthur, *Gospel According to Jesus*, xiv, “No one who is saved fully understands all the implications of Jesus’ lordship at the moment of conversion.” Cf. Grudem, “Free Grace” Theology, 23.

²⁸Grudem, “Free Grace” Theology, 24.

²⁹Zane C. Hodges, “Hebrews,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary. New Testament Edition* (ed. John Walvoord and Roy Zuck; Victor Books, 1983), 777–813.

³⁰Zane C. Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege: A Study on Faith and Works* (Redención Viva, 1981), 19–33.

³¹Grace Evangelical Society website (<https://faithalone.org/beliefs/>) Accessed 7/31/2019.

³²Free Grace Alliance website (<https://freegracealliance.com/mission-and-beliefs/>) Accessed 7/31/2019.

helpful to list the five ways that Free Grace theology diminishes the gospel teaching of the Bible. These come from Wayne Grudem's book, *"Free Grace" Theology: 5 Ways It Diminishes the Gospel*, which I have referenced several times already. Please refer to this book for documentation and further explanation.

- The Free Grace movement does not teach the Reformation doctrine of "justification by faith alone." In particular the historic Protestant position has been: "We are justified by faith *alone*, but the faith that justifies is *never alone*."
- Free Grace theology weakens the gospel message by avoiding any call to unbelievers to repent of their sins. A verse like Hebrews 6:1 makes the connection between repentance and faith clear: "Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God."
- Free Grace theology gives false assurance of eternal life to many people who profess faith in Christ but then show no evidence in their pattern of life. Sadly, many who give mere intellectual assent to the Gospel are assured that they have genuine saving faith.
- Free Grace teaching overemphasizes agreement with facts and underemphasizes heartfelt trust in the person of Christ. While there is a division among Free Grace teachers over this issue in that one group speaks of *intellectual assent* and the other group speaks of *trust that is placed in the person of Jesus*, there is still an overemphasis on belief in facts.
- Free Grace advocates have to adopt numerous highly unlikely interpretations of the New Testament because of the need to defend their mistaken understanding of the word "alone" in the phrase "faith alone." 3 examples: John 15:6 explains the branches taken away and burned as examples of believers who are chastened; Romans 10:9–13 is a call not of salvation but of the need of believers to seek for God's help and deliverance in daily life; 2 Corinthians 13:5 means that Christians should examine themselves to see if they are living a dynamic Christian life.³³

Before discussing the Free Grace approach to perseverance and assurance as it relates to growth in holiness, I believe it would be helpful to explain the relationship between dispensationalism, Chaferian sanctification, and Free Grace theology. I am choosing to go down this rabbit trail because there have been too many authors both within these three groupings and outside of them who have confused them with each other. For example, some believe that all dispensationalists hold to the view of sanctification

³³To learn the Free Grace treatment of these and several other passages, see Joseph C. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings: A Study of Eternal Security and the Final Significance of Man* (Schoettle Publishing Co., 1992); and Fred Chay, ed., *A Defense of Free Grace Theology* (Grace Theology Press, 2017), 379–607. Grudem, *"Free Grace" Theology*, 119, refers to these unique Free Grace interpretations as "strained, . . . idiosyncratic, . . . artificial and contrived, . . . insensitive to context, and . . . completely unpersuasive and foreign to the New Testament."

championed by Lewis Sperry Chafer, the view we have called the Chaferian view.³⁴ But this is not at all true. If we can conceive of a grouping of 3 concentric circles, I believe we can understand how the views of these three groups relate (see the appendix for a diagram). The **first** circle is the largest and it includes all dispensationalists. The **second**, smaller circle fits entirely inside the dispensational circle—it is the Chaferian model of sanctification. Since everyone who follows in the sanctification train headed up by the chief engineer, Lewis Sperry Chafer, also embraces the dispensationalism Chafer taught, all Chaferians are dispensationalists. But it is a grievous error to equate the Chaferian model of sanctification with the entire system of dispensationalism, for many dispensationalists hold to a different model of sanctification. This is because dispensationalism is primarily related to eschatological and ecclesiological aspects of theology, not soteriological aspects. The **third**, smallest circle fits entirely within the Chaferian circle—it is the Free Grace movement. Again, this is due to the progenitor of the Free Grace group, Zane Hodges, who was a dispensationalist and who held to the Chaferian model of sanctification, especially the teaching regarding the distinction between two types of Christians—the carnal and the spiritual (i.e. those who have accepted Christ as Savior and those who have accepted Christ as Lord). Thus everyone in the Free Grace movement would typically hold to the Chaferian model of sanctification and would also be dispensationalists. But not every Chaferian holds to Free Grace theology just as not every dispensationalist holds to the Chaferian model of sanctification. I trust that this picture will enable us all to think correctly about these three groupings and how they relate to each other.

Free Grace and Perseverance

Since my focus in this essay relates to issues in sanctification, I will not be addressing the Free Grace concern with the nature of saving faith and its relationship to repentance (point #1 in regard to the heart of Free Grace theology – see p. 7). However, the second point we mentioned earlier deals with the connection between saving faith and good works, and this subject certainly calls for treatment in light of the focus of this essay on the subject of perseverance.

Why has assurance become such an important focus in Free Grace theology? Though there are undoubtedly a number of reasons that a diligent study of Free Grace literature might unearth, I do know of two in particular: 1) assurance is tied to saving faith (Heb 11:1 – Faith is the assurance of things hoped for), and if faith includes assurance and is a gift, then assurance is provided when faith is exercised.³⁵ Thus, if saving faith has been exercised, assurance must be included. 2) An assured believer rests in his position and has confidence to obey God rather than condemnation in that he is never sure of his present standing with God.³⁶ Indeed, giving the believer assurance of his salvation is of utmost

³⁴Jonathan R. Pratt, "Dispensational Sanctification: A Misnomer," *DBSJ* 7 (2002): 95–108. I provide a number of examples of people who have made this wrong assumption including John Walvoord among dispensationalists and John Gerstner among Reformed teachers. Pursuing this question from a little different angle, Mark Snoeberger, "Second-blessing Models of Sanctification and Early Dallas Dispensationalism," *TMSJ* 15 (Spring 2004): 93–105, shows this assumption to be incorrect as well.

³⁵Dillow, *Reign of the Servant Kings*, 288.

³⁶David R. Anderson, *Free Grace Soteriology* (3d ed.; Grace Theology Press, 2018), 205.

importance to Free Grace teachers; in fact, these teachers want to make Christian assurance “absolutely certain.”³⁷ D. A. Carson gives such an excellent summary of Free Grace thinking with respect to assurance that I include it here:

“[Free Grace proponents] tie assurance exclusively to saving faith, and divorce it from any support in a transformed life. The countless passages that tie genuine discipleship to obedience are handled by making a disjunction between ‘discipleship’ passages and those that promise eternal life. Eternal life turns on faith in the saving Son of God; discipleship turns on obedience; and Christian assurance is tied only to the former. To link assurance in any way to the latter, it is argued, is to corrupt a salvation of free grace and turn it into a salvation partly dependent on works. If my salvation depends only on free grace, then the basis of my assurance is as steadfast as the freedom of that grace. But if my assurance depends on observing certain changes in conduct in my life, themselves the fruit of obedience, then implicitly I am saying that, since I cannot be assured of salvation without seeing obedience, salvation itself depends on some mixture of faith plus obedience—and free grace is thereby destroyed. Hence the name of this new evangelical society [6 years old at the time of this reference]. Its members are persuaded that the purity of the gospel of grace is at stake.”³⁸

But I am afraid that the view of assurance which neglects the Bible’s support of perseverance in favor of the desire to give certainty to someone of his standing in the family of God is imbalanced and out of step with the teaching of the New Testament. I would like to provide five scriptural arguments that speak against the Free Grace view of assurance and perseverance. Then I would like to conclude with a few practical ramifications of the Free Grace viewpoint, showing how it has negative effects for Christians.

Scriptural Arguments that Oppose Free Grace Assurance. In providing these five arguments I am responding to particular points made by Free Grace writers. For each one I will provide the Free Grace supposition followed by the scriptural response which contradicts that supposition. Unfortunately, space and time limitations prohibit me from providing much more than a short explanation of either the supposition or the response. Please believe me when I say that I am not arguing against straw men in any of the five, for one will find ample expression of these Free Grace ideas in the sources mentioned in n. 38 as well as many other Free Grace writings.

- The effects and meaning of repentance

³⁷D. A. Carson, “Reflections on Christian Assurance,” *WTJ* 54 (Spring 1992): 6.

³⁸Carson, “Reflections,” 6. This article is the best biblical-theological treatment of assurance written in the past 30 years. Carson’s insights are clear, irenic, and penetrating.

In order to avoid the possibility of drowning in the details of Free Grace thinking with regard to assurance I suggest three resources for further study: Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege*, Chapter 2: “Can I Really Be Sure?” 9–18; Anderson, *Free Grace Soteriology*, 191–228; and Joseph Dillow, “Finding Assurance,” in *A Defense of Free Grace Theology with Respect to Saving Faith, Perseverance, and Assurance* (ed. Fred Chay; Grace Theology Press, 2017), 193–238.

- Free Grace: some Christians may have only an intellectual agreement with the facts of the gospel and still be truly saved. This is due to the fact that repentance refers only to a “resolve to turn from sin” with regard to the facts of the gospel.³⁹
- Scriptural Response: The NT epistles frequently warn churchgoers that some among them may not be saved because they are not producing good works, i.e. their “resolve to turn from sin” was not a real change of direction (1 Thess 1:9 – For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God). See James 2:14–17; 1 Cor 6:9–11; 2 Cor 13:5; Heb 3:12; 1 John 2:3–6; 3:6, 9–10, 14. In regard to these passages Grudem comments, “[These] passages also challenge churchgoing people to be sure that they have genuine, saving faith, not merely superficial intellectual agreement with the facts of the gospel.”⁴⁰
- Spurious or false faith
 - Free Grace: not only do Free Grace proponents disagree with the idea that true believers will inevitably persevere in good works but they also argue that a believer can actually fall away from the faith and cease believing.⁴¹ In such cases these types of believers are said to be carnal Christians who will be saved but who will miss out on rewards at the Judgment Seat of Christ.
 - Scriptural Response: The NT writers recognize the existence of spurious or transitory faith. This is clear from the warnings in Hebrews, all five of which clearly warn about the possibility of falling away into apostasy; it is clear from the demand for self-examination with regard to being in the faith (2 Cor 13:5); it is clear in the departure of false teachers from the assembly (1 John 2:19); it is clear from Jesus’ description of spurious faith among his supposed followers (Matt 7:21–23; John 2:23–25; 6:66; 8:31); and it is clear from the parable of the sower, especially with regard to the 2nd and 3rd groups of fruitless soils (Mark 4:3–20 and parallels).⁴² Furthermore, the

³⁹David R. Anderson, “The Role of Repentance in Salvation,” in *A Defense of Free Grace Theology* (ed. Fred Chay; Grace Theology Press, 2017), 95–98. Anderson nuances this statement about mere “intellectual agreement” but in the end he does not connect repentance with justification, which he calls “relationship truth”; rather, he connects repentance with sanctification, which he calls “fellowship truth.” With regard to the relationship between justification and repentance, he believes that repentance “is completely unnecessary” (98).

⁴⁰Grudem, *“Free Grace” Theology*, 80.

⁴¹Zane C. Hodges, *Absolutely Free: A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation* (2d ed.; Grace Evangelical Society, 2014), 147; Dillow, *Reign of the Servant Kings*, 311–12, states, “In remote cases it is even possible that such [regenerate] people will publicly renounce Christ and persist in either sin or unbelief to the point of physical death.”

⁴²Carson, “Reflections on Assurance,” 13–21; Rolland McCune, *A Systematic Theology*, 3:173–78.

claim that Christians can be divided into two distinct groups of spiritual and carnal believers does not hold up to the teaching of the NT.⁴³

- The function of good works as a basis of assurance
 - Free Grace: the Grace Evangelical website states its position clearly—
“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.”⁴⁴ The important word in this statement is *only*.⁴⁵ While some Free Grace proponents say that good works have a confirming role in assurance, the overwhelming emphasis in the literature is on the primary role of God’s promises as the basis of assurance.⁴⁶ Practically speaking, Free Grace teachers deny the necessity of good works as a confirming element in providing assurance since they believe people may persist in unbelief to the point of death and still receive eternal life.
 - Scriptural response: the NT shows that God’s promises are the objective basis of assurance for believers; yet, it also shows that God uses other subjective evidences to encourage the assurance of believers.⁴⁷ These include the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit (Rom 8:15–16), evidence of inward graces (2 Pet 1:5–11), the good works that accord with genuine faith (James 2:14–26), and the reassuring evidences of faith (right belief, right behavior, right love) in 1 John.⁴⁸
- The importance of assurance
 - Free Grace: “Lordship salvationists,” i.e. non-Free Grace proponents, do not have any warrant for providing *present* assurance to believers because they believe in perseverance, which is naturally *future-oriented*. Thus, they

⁴³Carson, “Reflections on Assurance,” 7–13, gives an excellent refutation of the carnal Christian teaching based on an exegesis of 1 Corinthians 3 and a development of how the New Covenant promises apply to *all* of God’s new covenant people. See also Ernest C. Reisinger, *What Should We Think of “The Carnal Christian”?* (Banner of Truth Trust, 1978).

⁴⁴GES website (<https://faithalone.org/beliefs/>). Accessed 8/1/2019.

⁴⁵Anderson, *Free Grace Soteriology*, 228, states, “We believe a person can have absolute assurance that he is born again the moment he believes. We can give him this assurance, not because of a change in his life which we can feel or see, but because we believe without doubt the promises of God which offer eternal life as a free gift to anyone who believes in Jesus Christ as the Son of God and Savior from our sins.”

⁴⁶Dillow, “Finding Assurance,” 203.

⁴⁷Carson, “Reflections,” 3–5, 26–29; Grudem, “*Free Grace*” *Theology*, 87–88.

⁴⁸Second London Baptist Confession, 18.2: “This certainty is not a bare conjectural and probable persuasion, grounded upon a fallible hope, but an infallible assurance of faith, founded on the blood and righteousness of Christ revealed in the gospel; and also upon the inward evidence of those graces of the Spirit unto which promises are made, and on the testimony of the Spirit of adoption, witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God; and as a fruit thereof, keeping the heart both humble and holy.” Also, Carson, “Reflections,” 26–27.

basically downplay the possibility of offering assurance to believers in the present.⁴⁹

- Scriptural response: There are many texts that confirm Christians can have *present* assurance by seeing evidences of righteous fruit in their lives (2 Pet 1:10; 1 Jn 2:3–6). At the same time it is good to ask, “Why is giving personal assurance of salvation so significant to Free Grace teachers?” While I offered a couple of reasons earlier, Carson’s comment in this regard gives us a helpful perspective: “It is odd, however, that a few contemporary studies [i.e. Free Grace studies] have made personal assurance, or some peculiar understanding of it, the touchstone for the entire structure of Christian theology. The result has been truly astonishing distortions. On balance, this is a strange place to begin and end the study of theology. One might have begun with God, with Christ, with redemption, with revelation.”⁵⁰
- The mystery of compatibilism in sanctification
Note: To understand this point properly I need to define what I mean by “compatibilism”: This is the view that the following two statements are mutually compatible, despite superficial evidence to the contrary: 1) God is absolutely sovereign, but his sovereignty does not in any way mitigate human responsibility; 2) human beings are responsible creatures, but their responsibility never serves to make God absolutely contingent. This idea can be substantiated throughout Scripture but Acts 4:27–28 is perhaps the best example of the idea – “For truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.” This has ramifications for election, suffering, the nature of prayer, and assurance.⁵¹
 - Free Grace: The emphasis on texts that promise God’s sovereign commitment to preserve his own elect are seen as primary, while the texts that call believers to persevere in the faith are downplayed because they seem to take away from the divine nature of the free gift of salvation.⁵²
 - Scriptural response: 1 Corinthians 15:10 – But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. This verse demonstrates the mystery of sanctification, showing the work of God to initiate the good works of evangelism and ministry in Paul’s life

⁴⁹Anderson, *Free Grace Soteriology*, 227, states, “Hence, *present* faithfulness is an unreliable basis for present assurance. Only *future* faithfulness can provide any grounds for assurance. But the future is always out there. Until one dies, one can always fall away. Present faithfulness is not firm footing for assurance of salvation” (emphasis in original).

⁵⁰Carson, “Reflections,” 28.

⁵¹Carson, “Reflections,” 22–25.

⁵²Joseph Dillow, “The Role of Works in Justification,” in *A Defense of Free Grace Theology* (ed. Fred Chay; Grace Theology Press, 2017), 121–42. This entire chapter gives evidence of the inability to affirm both the sovereignty of God in guaranteeing justification by faith alone apart from works and the responsibility of the believer to persevere in good works as a necessary result of that justification.

while at the same time affirming the personal effort, prompted by God, that Paul expended in doing the work of the ministry. With regard to the subject of assurance Carson suggests a good way forward when considering texts that promise assurance and texts that demand perseverance: "Do warnings against apostasy function to annul the promises of God? Of course not. They are designed to promote perseverance. Do the promises of God serve to engender lethargy? Of course not. They are designed to promote zeal, gratitude, and appreciation of God's fidelity."⁵³

Ramifications of Free Grace theology of Assurance

As I mentioned in the introduction, imbalance in teaching about sanctification often results in negative and sometimes heretical realities for Christians. I believe that Free Grace's emphasis on assurance has sadly eclipsed a more biblically informed perspective on perseverance. I will share three ramifications of this emphasis and follow these up with an important observation about assurance and perseverance.

First, when the necessary link between good works and justification is severed in the interest of giving assurance, encouragement to strive for holiness is downplayed. I am not suggesting for a moment that Free Grace teachers do not care about living holy lives, but I am suggesting that the drive to emphasize present personal assurance of salvation has lent itself to an unfortunate diminishing of the importance of living obediently and seeing this grace in one's life as an encouragement in perseverance (1 John 2:3-6).

Second, the strong emphasis on assurance and lessened attention on perseverance has resulted in many unsaved people who think they are true converts. Grudem observes, "Many of these people do not even go to church anymore, but they still think that they are saved, because, if you were to ask them, they would say that they think it is true that they are sinners in need of salvation, and they think it is true that Jesus died to pay for their sins. Therefore, some Free Grace advocates have told them that they were already saved. Forever. And that is all they needed to hear. Now they can't be bothered to go near a church. If a Free Grace pastor warns them that they are going to lose heavenly reward, and that they are 'not living up to who they truly are,' they will just reason that everybody is going to be happy in heaven anyway, so why care? And they persist in their lives of sin. And they are lost."⁵⁴

Third, assurance is a gift of God's grace based on the unbreakable promises of God's Word. But we should likewise be aware of the subjective aspects of assurance: perseverance in good works and the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit. The stool of assurance rests on all three of these legs. Indeed, the promises of God are primary and strongest, but the other two are valuable and biblical just as the London Baptist Confession reminds us.⁵⁵

And finally, an observation: in the world where most of us live, apart from Free Grace emphases, we should ask ourselves why assurance is not discussed all that often. In that part of the evangelical world where Reformed theology dominates, Carson surmises that popular eschatology has become so this-worldly that there is "very little futurist elements left, except at the merely creedal level." He continues, "If we do not long for the

⁵³Carson, "Reflections," 26.

⁵⁴Grudem, *"Free Grace" Theology*, 78.

⁵⁵Second London Baptist Confession, 18.2.

consummation of our salvation in the new heaven and the new earth, for the *visio Dei* that is the believer's inheritance, then there is little point in talking about our assurance of gaining it."⁵⁶ But what about many in this audience who are waiting expectantly for the imminent return of our Lord? How certain are you of your place in God's family? Do you follow the example of Paul in 1 Corinthians 16:22 – "Our Lord, come!"? Do you have the assurance that you will be one of those caught up to meet him in the air? We can thank the Free Grace teachers for reminding us of the important truth of assurance even as we look to Christ for his aid in completing the good work he has begun in us and so persevere in faith and good works to the end.

⁵⁶Carson, "Reflections," 7.

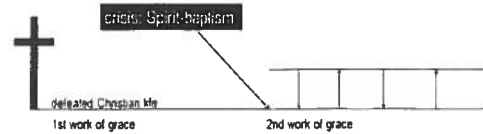
The Wesleyan View of Sanctification

entire sanctification, Christian perfection:
perfect love toward God and humans



The Pentecostal View of Sanctification

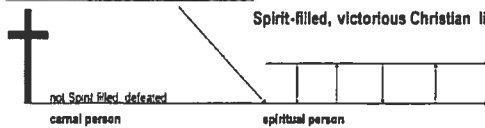
victorious Christian life;
Initial evidence = speaking in tongues



The Keswick View of Sanctification

crisis, consecration =
surrender (let go) + faith (let God)

Spirit-filled, victorious Christian life

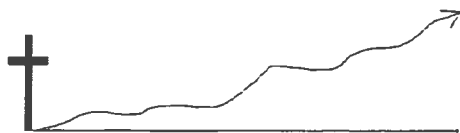


The Chaferian View of Sanctification

key = Spirit-filling



The Reformed View of Progressive Sanctification



spiritual person: submits to Christ as both Savior and Lord; may at times live like a "carnal" person in some areas; inevitably grows through means of grace

