

A Review of Wayne Grudem's "Free Grace" Theology: 5 Ways It Diminishes the Gospel

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This is both a book review and response to Wayne Grudem's book, *"Free Grace" Theology: 5 Ways It Diminishes the Gospel* (Crossway, 2016). I will not attempt to engage all of the theological arguments of his Reformed Calvinism or explain all of the theological arguments of Free Grace theology. Both views have a lot of resources in print. This review serves more as an "awareness guide" for those who have read or will read his book. Those unaware of the issues or those prone to agree with Dr. Grudem's concerns will probably not question his statements. But there are things that need to be known, some matters of facts, some matters of judgment.

What I like about the Book.

I appreciate Dr. Grudem's attempt to be fair and irenic. I do not find a mean tone or divisive spirit. I also know that in his research for this book, he attempted to interact with Free Grace proponents in order to represent us accurately. I think that may be reflected somewhat in the final product, but by his own admission, it did not at all change his views (p. 13). I think he tries to be as fair and accurate as someone can be who is trying to defend a theological system from within the confines of that system. Though he tries to be fair, he sometimes is not, as I will point out below.

I also appreciate Dr. Grudem's scholarship and attention to detail. He brings a great knowledge of historical Christianity, at least from the Reformation period forward. As a renowned scholar, he has also made some great contributions in the theological and academic realms. I probably agree with more of his theology than disagree.

I have no animosity toward someone who I consider a brother in Christ. I believe Dr. Grudem was saved "freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 3:24). I just do not believe he appreciates that grace as he could and should, and though accusing Free Grace theology of diminishing the gospel, *his* theology actually diminishes the gospel that saved him.

An Overview of the Book

After expressing some personal concerns, Dr. Grudem begins with a historical review of the doctrine of justification by faith since the Reformation (Chapter 1). His second chapter deals with his concern that Free Grace advocates do not preach repentance in our gospel (i.e., turning from sins). Chapter 3 expresses his concern that Free Grace advocates give people false assurance of salvation. Chapter 4 is his grievance that Free Grace advocates underemphasize trust in the person of Christ in our gospel. "Unlikely Interpretations" is the title of Chapter 5 where he tries to show how Free Grace advocates depart from traditional interpretations of gospel-related passages.

The tone of the book is one of concern. Dr. Grudem is warning evangelical Christians about the "harmful consequences" (p. 26) of Free Grace advocates who he claims give many who profess Christ false assurance of salvation (p. 97). He says, "Yet this book is about more than the Free Grace controversy. It is about the nature of the gospel that we proclaim in evangelism" (p. 17). With that statement I agree, and share the same concern about Dr. Grudem's gospel.

His Methodological Approach

I am not surprised that Dr. Grudem's first chapter is a review of Reformation doctrine with citations of creeds, confessions, and the Reformers. He even cites Arminians in support of the doctrine of justification by faith alone (p. 32). But that is no surprise either, since both theological systems require good works to validate saving faith. The irony here is that one of the earliest Reformed confessions, the Belgic Confession of 1651, denounces the interpretations of men as having authority over the Scriptures:

We believe that [the] holy Scriptures fully contain the will of God, and that whatsoever man ought to believe unto salvation is sufficiently taught therein...Neither may we consider any writings of men, however holy these men may have been, of equal value with those divine Scriptures nor ought we to consider custom or the great multitude, or antiquity, or succession of times and persons, or councils, decrees or statutes, as of equal value with the truth of God..." (Article VII)

Even the Westminster Confession, which Dr. Grudem seems to consider the ultimate expression of his Reformed Calvinist views, states,

The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. (1.6)

It leaves me wondering why, if these Reformed confessions elevate the Scriptures above the traditions and opinions of men, Dr. Grudem would begin his argument by citing confessions and men rather than explaining the relevant Scriptures. What quickly becomes apparent is that Dr. Grudem is more concerned with defending a theological system than the Scriptural evidence, a fact he makes clear when he says “we must always zealously guard the great Reformation truth of justification by faith alone” (p. 144). While I know of no Free Grace theologian who would not agree with that Reformation doctrine, I am simply saying that Dr. Grudem misplaces his zeal for Reformation doctrine over zeal for biblical authority. In fact, while the Reformers advocated *sola fide* (faith alone), they also advocated *sola scriptura* (Scripture alone). While thoughtful Bible study had a resurgence in the Reformation, that did not indicate an end to Bible study. John Calvin himself was later revised by his disciple, Theodore Beza, who also was not the last word in Bible study or doctrine. In our day, those who hold to *sola scriptura* as the Reformers did honor them when they continue to grapple with the intricacies of Scripture. If the traditions and doctrines of men had continued in their day unchallenged by Scriptures, we would all be Roman Catholics. Thank you, Martin Luther!

Which leads me to my next observation. While Thomas Schreiner, in his glowing endorsement, claims Dr. Grudem's book is “biblically saturated” (p. 2), we must conclude that Dr. Schreiner means there are a lot of biblical references. But biblical references do not an argument make (A concordance is also “biblically saturated”). We call the use of biblical references without explanation, exposition, or exegesis in context “proof-texting.” And that is what we find throughout most of the book. However, to his credit, in the last chapter of the book Dr. Grudem does make an effort to explain eleven passages crucial to the discussion.

Some Problems in Chapter 1

Dr. Grudem's intention in Chapter 1 is to show that Free Grace theology differs from the Reformers in our definition of “alone” as used in the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Dr. Grudem wants to allow “alone” to mean that other things must accompany faith, such as a resolve to turn from sins and to begin to obey God (p. 70-71). He says that genuine saving faith must result in turning from sins and obedience. But with this assertion he logically contradicts himself. If turning from sins and a changed life are *results* of justification by faith, then they are not the *condition* of justification, which is faith alone. If they are not the condition of justification, neither can they be the final proof of justification.

To make his point that the faith that saves is not alone, Dr. Grudem uses an illustration about the keys to his office not being alone on the keychain (pp. 37-38). But the illustration falls flat because only one key actually opens the office door while the other keys are used for other things. If the other keys were not on the chain, he could still open his office door with the one key.

Some Problems in Chapter 2

Repentance is the focus of this chapter. He says that Free Grace theology has two views of repentance: some believe it is a change of mind, while others believe it is an inner resolve to turn from sin (p. 55). (In an upcoming book, Roger Fankhauser shows that there are four views of repentance among Free Grace advocates, but that is not crucial to our evaluation of Grudem's argument).

In short, Grudem argues that if there is no deep turning from sin, there is no genuine saving faith.

Here I must take umbrage at how he misrepresents my motives in my discussion of repentance in my doctoral dissertation later printed in book form. By saying that I mislead, misrepresent, and fail to mention certain lexical definitions of repentance (pp. 56-63), he implies a deceptive motive. He simply fails to understand the point I am making, which I think others will see if they care to access the free version of *Lordship Salvation: A Biblical Evaluation and Response* online at GraceLife.org or obtain a hard copy from the same source.

In my doctrinal dissertation, written 26 years ago, I cite many lexical entries and authors who say that essentially *metanoia* (repentance) means *a change of mind*. There is almost universal agreement about that as the *pre-Christian and extra-biblical meaning* of the word. Even John MacArthur, no friend of Free Grace theology, says it essentially

means a *change of mind* (I cited him from the original edition of *The Gospel According to Jesus*, p. 162), though he goes on to embellish that. But here is the point that Dr. Grudem misses: When it comes to the use of the word in the New Testament, suddenly *repentance* is given a new meaning of *turning from sin*. I am happy to admit that most lexicographers and commentators claim such a meaning for *the New Testament uses*. But what I am showing is that this is a result of injecting and imposing one's theology on the biblical use of the word instead of letting the context determine the meaning. So yes, many lexicons, which recognize repentance as a *change of mind* in its secular and extra-biblical uses, change the meaning when it comes to New Testament uses. Do the New Testament authors purposely depart from the commonly understood meaning of repentance, or are they being theologically reinterpreted by modern commentators?

But my lexical arguments in *Lordship Salvation* are only a three-page discussion. I then show how the words *repent* and *repentance* are used in biblical contexts and support the meaning *change of mind* (which I prefer to call *change of heart*, meaning the inner person). My detailed discussion of the biblical texts in context are 18 pages long. Dr. Grudem's discussion of my three-page lexical arguments (much of which concerns a footnote) is *ten pages long* (pp. 55-64), while he dismisses my 18 pages of biblical arguments *with a single sentence* (pp. 63-64). Again, this is an example of theology and opinions of men that trump the Bible itself. If I had a mean streak, I would accuse Dr. Grudem of *misrepresenting* me by *failing to mention* my larger point about the interpretation of *repentance* in the New Testament, but I will give him the benefit of the doubt and assume he only misunderstands my point.

Some Problems in Chapter 3

Actually, all of Chapter 3 is a problem, because it concerns assurance, which is elusive or impossible in Dr. Grudem's system. Yet he writes that believers can have "some" assurance. Whether their assurance is "weak" or "strong" depends on weak or strong "evidence of belief," by which he means a change of life. (p. 92).

There are several problems here. First, *assurance*, according to English dictionaries, means *certainty*. "Some" and "strong" do not denote certainty. So the second problem is that Dr. Grudem really has no full and absolute assurance to offer, because one can only know whether he or she is saved by examining how much their lives have changed through their repentance and good works. We would all hope that such an examination takes place on a good day in the believer's life! The subjective nature of looking within to determine our salvation takes the focus off of Jesus Christ and the promises of Scripture. Does this not diminish the work of Christ, the authority of Scripture, and the gospel itself?

Besides the evidence of a changed life, Dr. Grudem lists four more things that form the basis for assurance: 1) "the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit," 2) "the leading of the Spirit," 3) "a deep inner sense of reliance upon Jesus Christ for salvation rather than reliance on oneself," and 4) "continuing in faith" (pp. 88-89). There is no appeal to the promises (assurances) of Scripture as a basis for assurance.

In fact, Dr. Grudem argues that we should not base our assurance entirely on the testimony of God in the Scripture. He says,

The question is not: How do I know that Christ has died for people's sins and that he will save all who believe in him? The question is, rather: How do I know *that I have truly believed?* (p. 85, emphasis his).

To this we should respond, *where in the Bible is that question ever asked or raised!?* And who are we to question God's promise in His Word?

Another problem with Dr. Grudem's dependence on good works as proof of salvation is that he never defines what comprises a good work. He speaks of "evident patterns of conduct" (p. 87). But is that enough to discern motives, and do not some unbelievers have a pattern of good conduct? We are left adrift in a sea of subjectivity—or perhaps worse, legalism (a focus on external behavior).

What also strikes me odd is Dr. Grudem's concern that Free Grace advocates are giving unbelievers false assurance of salvation. Not only because his alternative is no offer of full assurance, but because his Reformed Calvinistic theology would teach that the elect will believe and enjoy eternal salvation regardless of their assurance or lack of assurance. Given his theology, would it not be doing unbelievers a service to let them proceed to hell happily thinking they are saved? But if they are elect after all, then what's the worry? I am truly puzzled by his concern.

Some Problems in Chapter 4

In this chapter, his accusation is that “*Free Grace teaching overemphasizes agreement with facts and underemphasizes heartfelt trust in the person of Christ*” (p. 99, emphasis his).

There are major problems with his claim and approach. First, how does Dr. Grudem define or quantify overemphasis and underemphasis? Does this mean it is simply not to his satisfaction, or does he have biblical criteria (he offers none)? Would we say that Jesus underemphasizes heartfelt trust in His person when He preaches “Repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15; cf. 15:16). Or does Jesus overemphasize agreement with the facts when He prompts the remark from Martha “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world” (John 11:27; cf. 6:69). And is not the promise of eternal life to those who believe a fact that God intends us to believe (John 20:31)? And furthermore, how can we know and trust in Jesus Christ apart from the facts given to us in Scripture?

Dr. Grudem recognizes that there are some in the Free Grace movement who believe that faith is intellectual assent and some who believe it includes trust. What we observe in his book is that he accepts the theological (I would call it *psychological*) model of faith as having three parts: intellectual knowledge, agreement or assent, and trust or *fiducia* (p. 39). The problem with this model is that faith is seen in various places in the Bible appealing to one or another of these aspects. One can believe *that*, believe *in*, or be *willing* to believe, depending on the passage. Sometimes Scripture appears to emphasize the intellect and understanding (e.g., Matt 11:25-27; John 6:69; 20:31 Acts 26:28), but other times, the will (e.g., Matt 23:37; John 5:40; Acts 13:46; 16:31; 17:30; 1 John 3:23). The Bible does not psychologize faith into three parts, so the most we can say is that faith is the response of the inner person. By the way, to define trust as *fiducia* presents a tautology, that is, it uses the Latin word for *faith* to define the English word. Defining faith with faith is another weakness of this model. But we even see Dr. Grudem refer to repentance and faith as “decisions of the heart” (p. 42), which would seem to be a contradictory term in his view. Is not the intellect responsible for decisions?

Dr. Grudem puts a lot of weight on his view of faith as “a heartfelt trust in the person of Christ.” Yet we search the Scriptures for such a “heartfelt” emphasis (Romans 10:9-10 mentions the heart, but not in the sense of “heartfelt”). The Bible does not qualify what kind of faith saves. It only qualifies what kind of Savior saves. There is no biblical emphasis on examining one’s faith to see if it is genuine or heartfelt. The biblical emphasis is on the object of our faith, Jesus Christ. Faith is not our Savior; Jesus Christ is our Savior!

Some Problems in Chapter 5

In this chapter, Dr. Grudem discusses the “unlikely interpretations” of Free Grace folks. I will not say much here. Dr. Grudem chooses eleven verses that he thinks Free Grace advocates misinterpret and twist. Most of these verses have been explained and exegeted repeatedly by Free Grace authors in books and articles, so I will not respond. I only notice that Dr. Grudem shows limited familiarity with Free Grace interpretations. But in fairness, I would not expect him to read all of the Free Grace interpretations that are available. We could note, however, that the Reformers were also accused of “unlikely interpretations.” Thanks again, Martin Luther!

Finally, Some Unfortunate Misstatements and Misrepresentations

No author gets all of the facts straight, but we have to hold everyone accountable nevertheless. I will simply list in no particular order some statements that I think are false or inappropriate.

Dr. Grudem says that the Free Grace position tries to portray Lordship Salvation as a minority view (p. 24). The truth is quite the opposite. My long experience in the Free Grace movement shows that Lordship Salvation is the prevailing view. Why else the many books and articles from Free Grace folks about this issue? We recognize the popularity of John MacArthur, John Piper, and the many other Lordship Salvation advocates. It gives us job security and a reason to get out of bed!

Dr. Grudem also unfairly tries to minimize the academic credibility of Free Grace teachers. He says, rightly so, that many Free Grace authors self-publish or publish with little known publishers (p. 138). He mentions two exceptions: Zane Hodges who published with Zondervan (but he did not mention Bob Wilkin who also published with Zondervan), and myself who published with Kregel. But then he says that my book with Kregel, *Simply by Grace*, is out of print! I was so surprised to read this that I immediately contacted the head of Kregel to ask him if this was

true. Absolutely not, he said. The fact is, there have been three printings and more than seven foreign translations of this book. I don't know where Dr. Grudem got his information or why he would even want to say this. There are some other Free Grace authors who have published with major publishers too. But the argument that Free Grace authors don't have academic credibility because they do not have major publishers is akin to the argument that creationists are not credible scientists because they are not professors in our universities. The sobering truth is that evolutionists are in control of who teaches in their universities, and the Reformed Calvinists are largely in control of the publishing industry (and the academic organizations). For example, I know that Crossway, who published Dr. Grudem's book, was asked if they would publish a response by some well-qualified Free Grace scholars. They refused to do so. A couple of years ago, we heard that Dr. Grudem was going to present essentially this same critique of Free Grace theology at the Evangelical Society's Annual Meeting. I submitted a proposal that simply addressed misunderstandings about Free Grace theology (not an attack or direct response to Dr. Grudem), yet I was denied. I have reflected the Free Grace position in books and credible journal articles and presented at least four times in previous years at ETS with no problem. But it seems that all Free Grace presentation proposals were denied that year, though these people have presented before. Dr. Grudem is a recent past president of ETS, as is Thomas Schreiner. What are we to think? I'll leave you to your own conclusions.

Another example of Dr. Grudem's attempt to question the academic integrity of Free Grace authors comes out of a comment he makes about my reference to a 1976 article in the *Baptist Reformation Review* by Kenneth Gentry (p. 71, n. 45). I referenced him about faith and Lordship Salvation in my dissertation submitted to Dallas Theological Seminary in 1990 for my Ph.D. Dr. Grudem calls the *BRR* journal "fairly obscure" and notes that Gentry was only a "second-year seminary student" (Gentry has since established his academic credentials and published a book about his Lordship Salvation views that clarified some of his statements). First, I could argue that when I wrote my dissertation on Lordship Salvation I was *only* a doctoral student, yet Dr. Grudem is citing heavily from something written by this student in 1990. The dissertation is now in book form, but I purposely changed nothing except to transliterate the Hebrew and Greek for readers. Dr. Grudem should know that a doctoral student must access all and every source about his dissertation subject. In 1990, there was only one credible book on the subject of Lordship Salvation, John MacArthur's *The Gospel According to Jesus*, so that was my major source for interaction. There were a few poorly written books and a few articles on Lordship Salvation, so I had to show familiarity with them also. I can confidently assert that I was familiar with every substantial piece of literature that addressed the topic of Lordship Salvation up to 1990. It is unfair to characterize thorough research as sub-academic or sub-standard. The reason I wrote on the topic of Lordship Salvation was precisely because there was not much good literature on the subject!

A straw man argument that Dr. Grudem uses repeatedly is that Free Grace proponents give unbelievers false assurance based simply on their profession of faith or intellectual assent to facts about Christ (pp. 78, 83, 93). In my experience, I know of no Free Grace advocate who will take a profession of faith at face value without trying to discover what that person is actually believing in for eternal life before giving assurance. On the other hand, if someone gives a *clear* testimony of faith in Jesus Christ as Savior, I know of no Free Grace advocate who would deny the legitimacy of that testimony. It seems to me that Dr. Grudem's position can be turned on him, that is, if someone is repentant and bearing fruit, they could be given false assurance of salvation because they are trusting in their subjective evaluation of their subjective performance instead of Christ's Word and work.

Finally, I will mention something I should have begun with. Dr. Grudem has written a book criticizing the Free Grace view, which is founded on a biblical understanding of grace as the free, unmerited, and unconditional gift of God. *Dr. Grudem does not define or discuss the nature of grace!* His Subject Index has 11 pages listed for "faith" and 25 pages listed for "repentance," but not one reference to "grace." Could this be the reason behind Dr. Grudem's focus on human performance for salvation and assurance and his preference to be labeled as the "'non-Free Grace' position" (p. 25)? Grace focuses us on what God in Christ has done for us. Sadly, this emphasis is missing in his book. I would pray that Dr. Grudem becomes amazed by His grace, the free grace that saved him, so that he can rejoice in and share with others the sure hope of the gospel, and they too can rejoice in the assurance of their salvation.

So much more could be said. But I would encourage everyone to read Dr. Grudem's book after reading this review as an "awareness guide." We should all share his concern for a clear gospel. But all things considered, a clear gospel is not what he presents, because a clear gospel starts with the free grace of God who provides Jesus Christ as our substitutionary atonement and our hope of eternal life through simple faith in Him. This is how Free Grace magnifies the gospel.