

A HISTORY OF FREE GRACE: TRACING THE CONTROVERSY

A Paper

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Introduction

Opponents of “free grace theology” will often claim that it is a recent historical and theological aberration. Even those who advocate for free grace often assume that it was taught in the early church, but that the teaching of free grace was lost until recently.

That is simply not the case. This paper will briefly trace the free grace controversy and demonstrate that it is not a recent doctrine dreamed up in the last few decades.

But before we take a trip down the path of church history, we need to understand what free grace is and why it is controversial.

Free Grace Defined

Traditional Free Grace Theology¹ is the view that God saves sinners by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ and His sacrifice alone. No works before, during, or after the moment a person places their faith in Christ contribute anything to the free gift of salvation. God justifies the sinner on the singular condition of faith in Christ. The lost sinner does not need to forsake sin or promise to live a virtuous life in exchange for God’s free gift of salvation.

One of the key components of free grace is that it teaches absolute assurance of salvation. In other words, a person can be 100% convinced that they have eternal life the moment they trust Christ’s substitutionary death on the cross to save them from the penalty of their sins.

Free grace teaches *Preservation of the Saints* rather than *Perseverance of the Elect*. Believers will be preserved by the free grace of God. No saint will ever be lost even if they die in a sinful state. One cannot lose their salvation through sinning or failure of their faith. Assurance of salvation is based on the teaching of God’s Word, and not through introspection into one’s own works.

Free grace distinguishes between initial justification (the past tense aspect of salvation) and progressive sanctification (the present tense aspect of salvation). The past tense aspect of salvation (initial justification) occurs when the sinner trusts in Christ’s work on the cross which results in God’s declaration of righteousness. The present tense aspect of salvation (progressive sanctification) occurs throughout the lifetime of the believer as he understands and applies the principles of discipleship taught in God’s Word. Understanding the difference between initial justification and progressive sanctification is a liberating element of free grace. As a result of understanding this distinction, those who trust Christ as Savior can have complete assurance of salvation from the moment they believe.

¹ This paper is a defense of the traditional or normative view of free grace theology. It does not support an aberrant view of free grace which has been labeled by some as the “crossless gospel.”

Free Grace as a Systematic Theology

Systematic theology has been defined as “a discipline of Christian theology that formulates an orderly, rational, and coherent account of the doctrines of the Christian faith.”² It takes time to formulate any doctrine. It does not happen overnight. Doctrines frequently undergo refinement as Bible scholars discuss various theological aspects or nuances.

The same is true with free grace theology. When the Reformers parted ways with the Roman Catholic Church, they rediscovered the truths of free grace as taught in the Scriptures. However, there was room for refinement as theologians dealt with many questions over the centuries.

In commenting on Romans 1:17 Martin Luther said, “I clearly saw that the free grace of God is absolutely necessary to attain to light and eternal life.”³

As a theology, free grace has definitely seen refinement over the centuries. Elements of free grace theology can be seen in embryonic form in the teaching of Luther and Calvin. As Post-Reformation theologians considered issues such as assurance of salvation, free grace began to develop into a systematized theology. At what point were the doctrines of free grace formulated sufficiently to be classified as a “theology?” That is a more difficult question to answer and beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, I maintain that free grace theology as a systemized arrangement of doctrinal truth is anything but recent.

Free Grace as a Recent Movement

The label “recent” cannot legitimately be attached to “free grace” as a systemized theology. It might be easier to ascribe the label “recent” to “free grace” as a “movement.” For example, Wayne Grudem speculates:

Where did the modern Free Grace movement come from? As far as I can tell, it stems primarily from a minority view among the faculty members at Dallas Theological Seminary. More particularly, it stems from an aggressive promotion of the Free Grace viewpoint by Zane Hodges (1932-2008), who taught New Testament at Dallas Theological Seminary for twenty-seven years, from 1959 to 1986.⁴

Did the modern free grace “movement” begin with Zane Hodges? That claim is doubtful. Personally, I would place the date of the modern free grace “movement” much earlier—1918 to be specific.

Why would Wayne Grudem associate the modern free grace movement with Zane Hodges when it was Charles Ryrie and John MacArthur who brought the free grace / Lordship salvation debate into focus in the 1980s? Specifically, MacArthur’s book *The Gospel According to Jesus* (1988).

² <https://www.definitions.net/definition/systematic+theology> (last accessed: 11/23/21).

³ Ewald Plass, *What Luther Says*. (St. Louis, MO: CPH 1959), p. 835.

⁴ Wayne Grudem, *Free Grace Theology: 5 Ways It Diminishes the Gospel* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2016)

Theologians like to build strawmen that they can easily knock down to strengthen their case. They will find an abnormal example that exists among their opponents and portray that isolated instance as being the standard that represents the view of all their opposition. This is known as the “stereotype fallacy.” It is making assumptions about a whole group based on a sample that is inadequate, atypical, or too small. In my opinion, this is exactly what Wayne Grudem is doing with free grace as a movement.

The modern free grace movement can be divided into two wings. First is the traditional or normative view of free grace. This view is arguably held by most free grace advocates. While it may not have been labeled free grace at the time, it can be traced to a debate that occurred in 1918 between Lewis Sperry Chafer and B. B. Warfield. That controversy went through various refinements over the decades. Nevertheless, it began a discussion which developed into the traditional view of free grace as we know it today.

The second wing of the modern free grace movement is a minority view that was taught by Zane Hodges. This view has been promoted by Robert Wilkin and the Grace Evangelical Society. It teaches some aberrant views that are strongly repudiated by many in the traditional free grace camp.⁵

Dr. Ken Wilson notes: “He [Robert Wilkin] changed the GES doctrinal statement that ejected leaders and a majority of his members — eighty percent (80%) according to Wilkin’s statement to his former chairman of the GES board, Greg Sapaugh. Wilkin divided the Free Grace Movement. More accurately, as the former FGA president Fred Lybrand explained, Wilkin and GES left the Free Grace Movement.”⁶

To state that the modern free grace movement began with Zane Hodges, at best demonstrates an ignorance of the historical facts. Sadly this caricature of free grace attempts to color the entire landscape of the movement by painting a distorted picture based on an aberrant, minority group. This is a classical strawman fallacy.

As a modern day movement, many seeds of free grace were sown in 1918 when Lewis Sperry Chafer published a book titled, *He That Is Spiritual*. Reformed theologian, B. B. Warfield, took issue with the views espoused by Dr. Chafer regarding salvation. Chafer taught that salvation is by faith alone. The only requirement for salvation is to believe in Jesus who died in our place. Chafer grounded his teaching on his commitment to Sola Fide—Faith Alone.

For example, Dr. Chafer wrote:

In the preceding pages it is also pointed out that the New Testament declares directly and without complication in at least 150 passages that men are saved upon the sole principle of faith; and, in this connection, it has been demonstrated that it is not a matter of believing and repenting [i.e. believing and repenting are “two sides of the same coin” so to speak], of believing and confessing Christ, of believing and being baptized, of believing and surrender to God, of believing and confessing sin, or of believ-

⁵ For example, see *The Gospel of Christ* by Tom Stegall (Grace Gospel Press).

⁶ Ken Wilson. *Heresy of the Grace Evangelical Society* (Regula Fidei Press, 2021) Kindle Edition.

ing and pleading with God for salvation, but it is believing alone. Such belief is apart from works (Rom. 4:5), it is a committal of one's self to Christ (2 Tim. 1:12), and it is a definite turning [i.e. repenting] — an act of the will — to God from every other confidence (1 Thess. 1:9).⁷

More seeds of free grace were planted in 1959, when Everett Harrison and John Stott carried on a debate in *Eternity* magazine. The debate focused on whether a person could accept Jesus as Savior but not as Lord. In other words, does a person have to make a commitment to follow Jesus as Lord of their life in order to be saved? The view that a person must accept Jesus as both Lord and Savior at the point of salvation became known as the “Lordship Salvation” view.

In the 1980s, the debate over free grace was brought into the spotlight when Dr. John MacArthur published his book *The Gospel According to Jesus* in which he advocated Lordship Salvation. In response, Dr. Charles Ryrie published *So Great Salvation*. The focus of the controversy had to do with the requirements of salvation. Is simply faith alone in Christ's substitutionary death sufficient to save a person? Or does a person have to make a commitment to forsake all their sins in order to be saved?

Many who are aware of the free grace controversy, imagine that it began around the 1980s when Dr. MacArthur and Dr. Ryrie brought some of these doctrinal issues to the center stage. Others may even be aware of the previous debates that took place between personalities such as Harrison, Stott, Chafer and Warfield. But the fact is that the free grace controversy has been an issue since the church was first established.

The Biblical Basis for Free Grace

The test of correct doctrine has nothing to do with how recent or how ancient it is. The test of correct doctrine has everything to do with how it measures up with the Word of God. The fact is that free grace is based upon the teaching of God's Word.

Paul wrote that believers are “justified **freely by His grace** through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus (Rom. 3:24).”

The word translated “freely” is the NT Greek adjective δωρεάν [dōrean] meaning *freely* or *undeservedly*. It comes from the noun δωρεά [dōrea] which means *gift*.

The Bible Knowledge Commentary says, “God's justification of those who believe is provided freely (*dōrean*, “as a free gift,” i.e., without charge) by His grace.”⁸

Some people have a problem with the term free grace. They say that by definition, grace is free since it is “unmerited favor.” Therefore, to say *free* grace is being redundant. Ap-

⁷ Chafer, Lewis Sperry, *Systematic Theology*, 8 Vols., Vol. 3, pp. 392-393.

⁸ Witmer, John A. “Romans.” *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck. Vol. 2. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985. 451. Print.

parently, Paul did not consider the idea of free grace to be redundant. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit who inspired Paul to pen these words did not consider free grace to be redundant.

The Dictionary of Theological Terms elaborates on this idea of redundancy: “There is a double emphasis upon the thought of freeness here. *Freely* means “without a cause” (cf. John 15:25)—justification is not granted because of any merit in us but proceeds upon free grace alone.”⁹

Our culture says that there is no such thing as a “free lunch.” That idea is probably not unique to us living in North America today. No doubt Paul faced similar opposition to the idea of the freeness of God’s grace.

Warren Wiersbe concurs: “The Greek word translated ‘freely’ is translated in John 15:25 as ‘without a cause.’ We are justified *without a cause!* There is no cause in us that would merit the salvation of God! It is all of grace!”¹⁰

Other scholars explain the significance of Paul’s words: “The word *free gift* indicates that man contributes nothing toward being put in a right relationship with God, while the phrase ‘by God’s grace’ indicates that God supplies all that is necessary.”¹¹

Some object to free grace saying that the phrase is not used in the Bible. However, the New English Bible renders the phrase “freely by His grace” as “by God’s **free grace** alone (Rom. 3:24; NEB).”

Paul also wrote, “For the wages of sin is death, but the **free gift** of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 6:23; NASB).”

Certainly, the doctrine of free grace rests upon the foundation of God’s Word.

A Scriptural Example of Free Grace

Salvation by God’s free grace is as timeless as the Word of God. It has always been taught by the Scriptures. No one has ever been saved apart from God’s free grace. Abraham is a perfect example of salvation by God’s free grace. Genesis 15:6 says, “And he [Abraham] believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.” Paul reiterates that truth in Galatians 3:6 writing, “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.”

Not long after Paul wrote Galatians, he explained to the Romans what it meant for Abraham to be saved by God’s free grace:

For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.” Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace

⁹ Cairns, Alan. *Dictionary of Theological Terms* 2002: 199. Print.

¹⁰ Wiersbe, Warren W. *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. Vol. 1. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996. Print.

¹¹ Newman, Barclay Moon, and Eugene Albert Nida. *A Handbook on Paul’s Letter to the Romans*. New York: United Bible Societies, 1973. Print. UBS Handbook Series.

but as debt. But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness. (Rom. 4:3-5)

Paul was a champion of free grace. Unfortunately, when free grace is preached it often finds much opposition. Free grace as an unconditional gift of God has been controversial since the beginning of the church. This fact is demonstrated by the opposition that the Apostle Paul faced by the legalists of his day.

A Litmus Test of Free Grace

Litmus tests are used to determine if a chemical solution is acid-based or alkaline-based. As an idiom, the term litmus test is used to determine someone's true intentions or beliefs.

We might ask, "Is there a litmus test to determine if someone is preaching the gospel of God's free grace? How do you know if a preacher is adding works to the gospel of grace?"

As a matter of fact, there is a strong litmus test for free grace, and it is this: Do people accuse you of preaching a gospel that gives license to sin? If so, you are in good company, because that is exactly what the Apostle Paul was accused of!

Paul wrote: "And why not do evil that good may come?—as some people slanderously charge us with saying (Rom. 3:8; ESV)."

Legalists were slanderously charging Paul of promoting or glorifying evil. They were accusing Paul of giving people a license to sin. Paul responded to that charge in Romans chapter 6. Paul's refutation of that slanderous charge went like this:

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it? ...What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? Certainly not! (Rom. 6:1-2; 14)

The legalists were slandering Paul and twisting his words. No doubt they were saying things like, "Look at that Apostle Paul. He is telling people that they can continue living in sin because they are under grace. He is preaching 'easy believism.' He is teaching 'cheap grace.'"

The litmus test for free grace is simply this. If a preacher is not being accused of what Paul was being accused of, then maybe there is something wrong with his gospel message.

Lance Latham explained it this way:

The doctrine of justification by faith is so provocative that it creates a question for many. "Will not belief in the grace of God alone produce a licentious living on the part of the people?" "Perhaps the people of God will live presumptuous lives when they realize that they are saved by grace and not by works." We find the remarkable answer as we continue to consider the book of Romans. Paul asks the rhetorical ques-

tion, “*What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?*” (Rom. 6:1).¹²

William Mackay concurred writing, “Unless the gospel we preach, when presented to the natural mind, brings forth such a question, it is another Gospel than Paul’s.”¹³

Both William Mackay and Lance Latham had a solid understanding of God’s free grace. We would expect no less than a defense of the free grace position by these non-Reformed Bible scholars. Surprisingly, they were joined in their defense of free grace by an unlikely colleague.

Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (Covenant / Reformed Theologian) made this amazing observation:

The true preaching of the gospel of salvation by grace alone always leads to the possibility of this charge being brought against it. There is no better test as to whether a man is really preaching the New Testament gospel of salvation than this, that some people might misunderstand it and misinterpret it to mean that it really amounts to this, that because you are saved by grace alone it does not matter at all what you do; you can go on sinning as much as you like because it will redound all the more to the glory of grace. That is a very good test of gospel preaching. If my preaching and presentation of the gospel of salvation does not expose it to that misunderstanding, then it is not the gospel. Let me show what I mean.

If a man preaches justification by works, no one would ever raise this question. If a man’s preaching is, ‘If you want to be Christians, and if you want to go to heaven, you must stop committing sins, you must take up good works, and if you do so and constantly, and do not fail to keep on at it, you will make yourselves Christians, you will reconcile yourselves to God, and you will go to heaven’. Obviously a man who preaches in that strain would never be liable to this misunderstanding. Nobody would say to such a man, ‘Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?’, because the man’s whole emphasis is just this, that if you go on sinning you are certain to be damned, and only if you stop sinning can you save yourselves. So that misunderstanding could never arise. And you can apply the same test to any other type or kind of preaching. If a man preaches that you are saved by the Church, or by sacraments, and so on, this kind of argument does not arise. This particular misunderstanding can only arise when the doctrine of justification by faith only is presented.

There is a sense in which the doctrine of justification by faith only is a very dangerous doctrine, dangerous, I mean, in the sense that it can be misunderstood. It exposes a man to this particular charge. ... Nobody has ever brought this charge against the Church of Rome, but it was brought frequently against Martin Luther; indeed that was precisely what the Church of Rome said about the preaching of Martin Luther. They said, ‘This man who was a priest has changed the doctrine in order to justify his own

¹² Lance B. Latham, *The Two Gospels* (Rolling Meadows: AWANA Youth Association, 1984), p. 55

¹³ William Mackay *Grace and Truth* (London: J. Nisbet and Co. 1874) p. vi

marriage and his own lust’, and so on. ‘This man’, they said, ‘is an antinomian; and that is heresy.’ That is the very charge they brought against him. It was also brought against George Whitefield two hundred years ago. It is the charge that formal dead Christianity ... has always brought against this startling, staggering message, that God ‘justifies the ungodly’, and that we are saved, not by anything that we do, but in spite of it, entirely and only by the grace of God through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.¹⁴

The apostle Paul was accused of being antinomian (meaning “against the law”) in his presentation of the gospel of God’s free grace. He was the role model for preachers of free grace.

Pauline Justification and Free Grace

The apostle Paul taught forensic, legal, or judicial justification. Forensic justification is God’s legal act by which an unrighteous sinner who believes in Jesus Christ as Savior is declared righteous before God, because Christ’s righteousness is imputed to him. The righteousness of Jesus is applied to the unrighteous sinner’s account. As a result, we now have a new legal standing before Him because He declares that we are no longer guilty as sinners.

Forensic justification was a central element of Pauline theology. As we shall see, forensic justification was rediscovered by the Reformers when they broke away from the Roman Catholic Church. It is also a foundational component of free grace theology.

As we mentioned previously, the Apostle Paul taught that we are “justified [δικαιόω; dikaioō] freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus (Rom. 3:24).” A few verses later Paul insisted: “For we maintain that a man is justified [δικαιόω; dikaioō] by faith apart from works of the Law (Rom. 3:28).”

What does it mean to be justified?

The New Testament Greek word δικαιόω [dikaioō] means to declare or pronounce righteous.

Rather than saying “being justified freely by His grace,” Young’s Literal Translation renders Romans 3:24 as “being declared righteous freely by His grace.”

David Dockery writes:

In verse 24 he said that all who believe “are justified.” *Justified* is a legal term meaning to *declare righteous*.¹⁵

The biblical concept of justification is the picture of a courtroom. As Judge, God declares that the sinner is now legally acceptable because divine justice has been satisfied by Jesus

¹⁴ Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: Exposition of Chapter 6* (Edinburgh, Banner of Truth, 1972)

¹⁵ Dockery, David S. “The Pauline Letters.” *Holman Concise Bible Commentary*. Ed. David S. Dockery. Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998. 546. Print.

Christ. This verdict does not make the sinner become righteous. God declares a sinner righteous in legal standing. This is known as forensic, legal, or judicial justification.

In commenting on Romans 3, Bible scholars have noted this judicial concept of justification. Notice the important distinction between to *declare* righteous and to *make* righteous.

John Witmer: “In view of man’s sin God has stepped in with His provided righteousness, because all who believe **are justified**.... ‘Justify’ (*dikaiōō*) is a legal term, meaning ‘declare righteous’ (not ‘make righteous’; cf. Deut. 25:1).”¹⁶

Thomas Constable: “Justification is an act, not a process. And it is something God does, not man. As mentioned previously, justification is a forensic (legal) term. On the one hand, it means to acquit (Exod. 23:7; Deut. 25:1; Acts 13:39). On the other, positive side, it means to *declare* righteous. But it does not mean to *make* righteous.... Justification describes a person’s status in the sight of the Law, not the condition of his or her character. The condition of one’s character and conduct has to do with sanctification.”¹⁷

William Newell: “The word never means to make one righteous, or holy; but to account one righteous. Justification is not a change wrought by God in us, but a change of our relation to God.”¹⁸

The act of being declared righteous relates to the past tense aspect of salvation or justification. In contrast, being made righteous relates to the present tense aspect of progressive sanctification. It is extremely important not to confuse these concepts. Warren Wiersbe explains:

Justification is the act of God whereby He declares the believing sinner righteous in Christ on the basis of the finished work of Christ on the cross. Each part of this definition is important, so we must consider it carefully.

To begin with, justification is an *act*, not a process. There are no degrees of justification; each believer has the same right standing before God. Also, justification is something *God* does, not man. No sinner can justify himself before God. Most important, justification does not mean that God *makes* us righteous, but that He *declares* us righteous. Justification is a legal matter. God puts the righteousness of Christ on our record in the place of our own sinfulness. And nobody can change this record.

Do not confuse justification and sanctification. Sanctification is the process whereby God makes the believer more and more like Christ. Sanctification may change from day to day. Justification never changes. When the sinner trusts Christ, God declares

¹⁶ Witmer, John A. “Romans.” *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*. Ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck. Vol. 2. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985. 451. Print.

¹⁷ Dr. Thomas L. Constable, *Notes on Romans*. Pages 54-55

¹⁸ William R. Newell, *Romans and Revelation Verse by Verse*. N. p. Print.

him righteous, and that declaration will never be repealed. God looks on us and deals with us as though we had never sinned at all!¹⁹

Free grace theology is grounded in forensic justification as it was taught by the apostle Paul.

The Early Church Fathers and Free Grace

What did the Early Church Fathers teach about the free grace concept of forensic justification? While the scriptures are our final authority, it can be helpful to see what others have taught throughout church history.

Thomas Schreiner is a professor of New Testament Interpretation at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. In his book, *Faith Alone*, he states: “In the writings of the earliest Christians we do not find many references to justification, but the evidence we do have supports the notion that most early church fathers understood justification forensically.”²⁰

We do have a few examples in the writings of the Early Church Fathers that indicate they taught Pauline justification which is an important element of free grace.

Clement of Rome taught that justification is by faith and not by works. Clement was an early church father who lived near the end of the first century. He was a bishop of the church in Rome. He is the same Clement mentioned by the apostle Paul in Philippians.

And I urge you also, true companion, help these women who labored with me in the gospel, with *Clement* also, and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the Book of Life (Phil. 4:3).

He is known for a letter that he wrote from Rome to the church at Corinth about A.D. 96. This letter is the earliest Christian document outside the New Testament. In that letter he wrote:

And we, therefore...are not justified of ourselves or by our wisdom or insight or religious devotion or the holy deeds we have done from the heart, but by that faith by which almighty God has justified all men from the very beginning.²¹

Ignatius of Antioch (35-107) taught that justification is by faith and not by works. Thomas Schreiner wrote: “Ignatius emphasizes that believers live according to grace and center on Jesus Christ... Justification for Ignatius centers on Jesus Christ, and the atonement that comes through his blood, so that Christ is understood as a substitute.”²²

¹⁹ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*. Vol. 1. (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996). Print.

²⁰ Thomas Schreiner, *Faith Alone* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015). Print.

²¹ The Letter of the Church of Rome to the Church of Corinth, Commonly Called Clement’s First Letter

²² Thomas Schreiner, *Faith Alone*.

Origen (185-254) taught that justification is by faith and not by works. He wrote: “Faith is the foundation of our justification, so that righteousness isn’t based on works of the law.”²³

Chrysostom (347-407) taught that justification is by faith and not by works. “Chrysostom insists that justification can’t be given through works since God demands perfect obedience. Hence, the only way to be justified is through grace.... Chrysostom’s articulation of justification seems to be thoroughly Pauline.”²⁴

If the Early Church Fathers taught a version of free grace, then when did things go off track? We cannot be 100% certain. But the doctrine of free grace was definitely compromised around the year 400 A.D. through the influence of Augustine of Hippo.

Augustine and the Abandonment of Free Grace

Augustine (354-430) opposed elements of free grace as well as the teaching of the Apostle Paul. He denied the Pauline doctrine of forensic justification. Augustine taught that God *makes* the sinner righteous rather than *declares* the sinner righteous. The teaching of Augustine set the stage for the Roman Catholic Church which destroyed any hope of the believer having assurance of salvation.

Augustine is one of the Latin Fathers. He spoke Latin and never learned the Greek language of the New Testament well. He received his classical education in North Africa. His schooling was conducted mainly in Latin rather than in Greek. Augustine later wrote in his *Confessions* that his first Greek teacher was a brutal man who constantly beat his students. As a result, Augustine rebelled by vowing never to learn Greek.

Dave Anderson explains the significance of Augustine’s incompetence in the Greek language:

“Augustine’s scant knowledge of Greek caused him to misunderstand δικαιόω translating it ... ‘to make righteous,’ as opposed to the defining truth of the Reformers that this word meant “to declare righteous.” The distinction was enough to cause schism in Western Christianity. Whereas the former meaning signified a change of *character*, the latter meaning referred to a change of *standing*. ‘To make righteous’ looked to one’s experience in life, but ‘to declare righteous’ looked to the court room of heaven.”²⁵

We stated previously that the Greek verb δικαιόω [dikaioō] means “to declare righteous.” But can we prove that it does not mean “to make righteous?” The definitive answer to our question can be found in the Gospel of Luke.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ David R. Anderson, *The Soteriological Impact of Augustine’s Change from Premillennialism to Amillennialism: Part One*.

And when all the people heard Him, even the tax collectors justified [δικαιόω; dikaioō] God, having been baptized with the baptism of John (Luke 7:29).

What does it mean to justify God? Does it mean to **declare** God to be righteous or does it mean to **make** God righteous?

If the Greek scholars are right, then the tax collectors justified God by **declaring** Him to be righteous.

On the other hand, if Augustine is right, then the tax collectors justified God by **making** Him righteous. But how can a sinful human being **make** God righteous? The idea that a mere mortal can **make** God righteous is absurd.

Therefore, the Greek word δικαιόω [dikaioō] must mean “to **declare** one to be righteous.”

Augustine got that wrong. Unfortunately, his error did not stop there. Like falling dominoes, his errors continued to multiply as he paved the way for the Roman Catholic Church. Both Augustine and later Roman Catholicism taught that no one could know for certain that they have eternal life. The free grace teaching of Paul and the Early Church Fathers definitely left the tracks with the “no assurance” teaching of Augustine and the Roman Catholic Church.

The Reformation and the Rediscovery of Free Grace

Martin Luther was a Roman Catholic priest. Because of Catholic teaching, he was fearful of hell, and God’s wrath. He was haunted with insecurity about his eternal destination. He immersed himself into the study of Scripture, especially the letters written by the Apostle Paul. Eventually, Luther came to understand that he was “saved by grace through faith” alone (Ephesians 2:8). His newfound enthusiasm about assurance of salvation began to spill over into his teaching. It didn’t take long for his radical ideas to get noticed. In January of 1521, Luther was officially excommunicated by the Pope.

John Calvin also saw assurance of salvation as being an issue that separated the new Protestant movement from Roman Catholic beliefs.

Luther and Calvin saw that assurance of salvation is tied directly to the atonement accomplished by Jesus at the cross. As they considered the dogma taught by the Roman Catholic Church, they wrestled with questions such as:

- Who did Jesus die for?
- Can I know that He died for me?
- Can I know that I am forgiven because of the atonement?

They found answers to these questions in God’s Word. They rediscovered Pauline forensic justification—that God declares the sinner righteous freely by His grace. They understood

that God saves sinners *by grace alone* through *faith alone* in *Jesus Christ and His sacrifice alone*.

It did not take long for Luther and his followers to find themselves under the anathema of the Roman Catholic Church as pronounced at The Council of Trent. That council proclaimed:

If anyone says that a sinner is justified by faith alone, meaning that nothing else is required to cooperate in order to obtain the grace of justification let him be anathema (Council of Trent, Canon 9).

If anyone says that justifying faith is nothing more than confidence in divine mercy, which remits sins for Christ's sake, or that it is this confidence alone that justifies us, let him be anathema (Council of Trent, Canon 12).

Roman Catholic dogma taught that Christians could only hope to go to heaven. Luther and Calvin knew that such teaching only burdened the parishioners with endless dead works—masses, pilgrimages, and penances. In contrast, Luther and Calvin claimed their salvation with certainty.

The Reformers of the 16th century rejected the “no assurance” teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. Luther and Calvin laid the foundation for free grace theology. They taught that justification through faith alone is the grounds for assurance of salvation.

For example, John Calvin insisted that there was a right and a wrong way to attain certainty of salvation. The right way is to find assurance in Christ alone. There is no other basis for our assurance of salvation.

Sadly, it did not take long for the revival of free grace to find opposition from sources both expected and unexpected. Certainly the opposition from the Roman Catholic Church would have been anticipated. But opposition to free grace and assurance of salvation also quickly arose from within the newly formed Protestant churches. And surprisingly the opposition sprung up not only from Protestant churches down the street, but it came from individuals who were much closer to home.

For example, Theodore Beza was John Calvin's son-in-law and Calvin's hand-picked successor. He began the departure from Calvin in an effort to clarify Calvin's system of theology. Beza taught that assurance of salvation came by self-examination. According to Beza, you could only be sure of your salvation by examining your life to see if you were measuring up to the standards established by the theologians.

Theodore Beza and the Second-Generation Reformers abandoned Luther and Calvin's understanding of assurance of salvation. Reformed Theologian Robert Dabney explains the abandonment of Luther and Calvin by the Second-Generation Reformers.

The cause of this error is no doubt that doctrine concerning faith which the first Reformers, as Luther and Calvin, were led to adopt from their opposition to the hateful and tyrannical teachings of Rome. These noble Reformers. . . asserted that the assurance of hope is of the essence of saving faith. Thus says Calvin in his Commentary on Romans, “My faith is a divine and scriptural belief that God has pardoned me and accepted me.”

Calvin requires everyone to say, in substance, I believe fully that Christ has saved me. Amidst all Calvin’s verbal variations, this is always his meaning; for he is consistent in his error. . . for as sure as truth is in history, Luther and Calvin did fall into this error, which the Reformed churches, led by the Westminster Confession of Faith, have since corrected.²⁶

Likewise, M. Charles Bell agrees: “Without question, Calvin teaches that assurance of one’s salvation is of the very essence of faith. Assurance is not an optional extra for the believer.”²⁷

A. N. S. Lane adds: “For Calvin, it was not possible to partake of salvation without being sure of it. Assurance is not a second stage in the Christian life, subsequent to and distinct from faith. In the following century, some of his followers did separate them in this way and this, together with a departure from Calvin’s ground of assurance, led to a widespread loss of assurance.”²⁸

What did Luther and Calvin mean in saying “that the assurance of hope is of the essence of saving faith?”

Calvin explains: “He alone is truly a believer who, convinced by a firm conviction that God is a kindly and well-disposed Father toward him, promises himself all things on the basis of his generosity; who relying upon the promises of divine benevolence toward him, lays hold on an undoubted expectation of salvation.”²⁹

Augustine and the Roman Catholic Church denied Pauline forensic justification. Therefore, it was impossible for anyone to have assurance of salvation. In contrast, Luther and Calvin rediscovered Pauline forensic justification. As a result, a believer could indeed have assurance of salvation the moment they place their faith in the finished work of Christ on the cross. Unfortunately, the Second-Generation Reformers reverted back to the no assurance teaching of Augustine and the Roman Catholic Church.

²⁶ Robert L. Dabney, *Discussions of Robert L. Dabney, Vol. I* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1892), pp. 215-16

²⁷ M. Charles Bell, *Calvin and Scottish Theology: The Doctrine of Assurance* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1985), 22.

²⁸ A. N. S. Lane, “Calvin’s Doctrine of Assurance,” *Vox Evangelica* 11 (1979): pp. 32-33.

²⁹ Roy B. Zuck Editor, *Vital Theological Issues* (Eugene OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2006) p. 159

Reformed theologian Joel R. Beeke wrote an article titled, “Does Assurance Belong to the Essence of Faith? Calvin and the Calvinists.”³⁰ In that article he states:

“Whereas the early Reformers held that assurance is part and parcel with faith, post-Reformation divines felt free to distinguish assurance from faith as witnessed by chap. 18 of the Westminster Confession.”³¹

“The bulk of current scholarship, however, no longer views the post-Reformation struggle to develop a detailed doctrine of assurance as a faithful outworking of early Reformation principles.”³²

Beeke admits that the predominant view in contemporary scholarship is that post-Reformation theologians (aka Second-Generation Reformers such as Beza) departed significantly from John Calvin’s own view of assurance.

Luther and Calvin had it right! Unfortunately, it did not take long for Reformed theologians to depart from the teachings of Luther and Calvin regarding assurance of salvation.

But God always has His faithful remnant. Even though the “Reformed churches, led by the Westminster Confession of Faith” abandoned the scriptural teaching regarding assurance of salvation, there were those who continued to accurately teach the truth concerning assurance based on God’s Word.

The “Heretics” and the Revival of Free Grace in the Colonies (1636-1641)

Whenever the gospel of God’s free grace is proclaimed, it is sure to meet with opposition. That was certainly the case with the apostle Paul and with Luther and Calvin as well. That sad truth was also born out in the “Free Grace Controversy” of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the 1600s.³³

In 2014, Michael P. Winship published *Making Heretics: Militant Protestantism and Free Grace in Massachusetts, 1636–1641*.³⁴ Winship is Professor of History at the University of Georgia. His focus is on the Puritanism of early American history, as well as early modern English history. His book deals with the controversy over free grace that took place in the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

What was this controversy about? According to Winship, “The doctrinal ‘great question’ of the free grace controversy was ... assurance of salvation.”³⁵

³⁰ Beeke, “Does Assurance Belong to the Essence of Faith? Calvin and the Calvinists,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* (Spring 1994):43-71.

³¹ Ibid. 45

³² Ibid. 46

³³ See: [Colonial America’s Rejection of Free Grace Theology by L. E. Brown](#).

³⁴ Not only did Winship use the term “free grace” in his title, that phrase is used over 180 times elsewhere in the book.

³⁵ Michael P. Winship, *Making Heretics* (Princeton University Press, Kindle Edition).

The free grace people taught that it was possible for genuine believers to have assurance of their salvation. Those who opposed the free grace position, taught that it was extremely difficult for anyone to have assurance of their salvation. As a result, the opposition labeled those in the free grace camp “antinomian” which means “against the law.” Michael Winship described those who were opposed to free grace as “heresy hunters.”

Recall that Luther and Calvin saw assurance of salvation to be a defining issue between their understanding of Pauline justification and the no assurance dogma of the Roman Catholic Church. Both Luther and Calvin saw assurance as being the essence of salvation. It was Luther and Calvin who set the stage for the revival of free grace in the Colonies.

In the 1600s, the Church of England had little tolerance for Puritan dissenters. As a result, many Puritan dissenters left the British shores and sailed to the Americas where they might find religious freedom.

Some of those Puritans followed the teachings of Luther and Calvin regarding assurance of salvation. Among them were the Reverend John Cotton, John Wheelwright, and Anne Hutchinson to name just a few.

In the 1630s, trials were held in the Massachusetts Bay Colony to convict these so-called free grace “heretics.” One of the main issues contested at these trials was the free grace teaching concerning assurance of salvation. The hearings also focused on the issue of good works as it relates to the assurance of salvation. These matters were litigated both in civil courts as well as before religious tribunals.

John Cotton and John Wheelwright were publicly attacked for their free grace view of salvation. Wheelwright was found guilty of sedition. Anne Hutchinson was excommunicated and expelled from the colony along with her husband. Admittedly, Anne Hutchinson held to some other doctrinal aberrations. However, her punishment does not seem commensurate with her supposed “crime.”

These so-called “heretics” paid a tremendous price for their stance regarding the gospel of God’s free grace.

The “Marrow Men” and the Revival of Free Grace in Scotland (1700s)

About 10 years after the trials in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Edward Fisher published a book in England titled *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*.³⁶ It remained in relative obscurity for roughly 50 years. Eventually it sparked another free grace controversy in the Church of Scotland.

The Reverend Thomas Boston struggled with issues pertaining to the Law and the Gospel of God’s free grace in his early ministry. Around the year 1700 Boston was visiting a member of his congregation. He saw a book on the bookshelf which intrigued him: *The Marrow*

³⁶ Fisher used the term “free grace” 23 times in *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*.

of *Modern Divinity*. He borrowed it and discovered that it spoke to his heart and to the situation of his own ministry. He embraced its teaching of free grace, and he began to preach the doctrine of being justified freely by the grace of God.

Unfortunately, the legalists caught wind of what Boston was teaching and would have none of it! In 1720, the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland decided to weigh in on what was being taught by Thomas Boston and *the Marrow Men* who were advocates of free grace.

The Assembly condemned the book on the following grounds.

- 1) It taught that assurance of salvation was the essence of faith.

Apparently, the Church of Scotland was numbered among those Reformed churches that were determined to correct the teaching of Luther and Calvin regarding assurance being the essence of faith.

- 2) It taught a universal atonement and pardon in the cross.

Actually, Thomas Boston and the Marrow Men were good 5-Point Calvinists. They held to the Calvinistic doctrine of limited atonement rather than unlimited atonement. But they believed in the Great Commission and that the gospel message should be proclaimed to all people. In contrast, the General Assembly believed that the gospel should only be proclaimed to the elect. As such, these free grace men were falsely accused of preaching universal atonement.

- 3) It taught that holiness was not necessary to salvation.

This charge relates to the fifth point of Calvinism — Perseverance of the Elect. According to Calvinism, a genuine believer will persevere to the end of their life and “die in faith.” The problem with this teaching is that it destroys any possible hope of having assurance of salvation. The charge also relates to Calvinism’s inordinate preoccupation with examining self to obtain assurance of salvation. Good works became the measuring rod to determine the genuineness of one’s faith. Sadly, very few (if any) measured up to the standards proposed by the Reformed theologians.

- 4) It taught that the fear of punishment and the hope of reward are not allowed to be motives of obedience.

*Many Calvinists read John 3:16 as saying “For God so loved the world **of the elect** that He gave His only begotten Son...” It is assumed that God only loves the elect rather than the entire world. The problem that many Reformed Puritans faced was the haunting question: “How can I know if I am one of the elect?” Scripture teaches that “we love Him, because He first loved us (1 John 4:19).” The problem is that if you do not know if you are one of the elect, then you cannot*

possibly know if He loves you. Therefore, you cannot use love as a motive for obedience since you have no idea if you are numbered among the loved elect destined to spend eternity with the Savior who only died for a select few. Scripture also says, “for whom the LORD loves He chastens (Heb. 12:6).” Once again, the Calvinist has a problem since he does not know if the LORD loves him. Therefore chastening could not possibly be a motive for obedience either.

- 5) It taught that the believer is not under the law as a rule of life.

Thomas Boston and the Marrow Men were often falsely accused of being Antinomians because they held to the free grace understanding regarding the assurance of salvation. But on this point, they were once again wrongly charged. As good Calvinists, “they tenaciously believed that the law of God remains as the rule of life for the believer.”³⁷

Edward Fisher, Thomas Boston and *the Marrow Men* certainly held to some Calvinistic doctrines that most in the modern free grace movement would repudiate. Nevertheless, they certainly could be numbered in the free grace camp regarding assurance of salvation, Pauline forensic justification, and the proclamation of the gospel of God’s free grace to all people — not to only the elect. It should be remembered that Lewis Sperry Chafer was one of the pioneers of the modern free grace movement even though he himself was a 4-Point Calvinist.

Conclusion

The foundation for free grace rests upon God’s Word. The apostle Paul championed free grace concepts such as assurance of salvation, and forensic justification. Although these doctrines seemed to be lost during the dark ages, Luther and Calvin rediscovered them paving the way for free grace theology. Luther and Calvin’s undeveloped version of free grace looked different than the refined free grace of today. Nevertheless, those kernels of truth related to assurance and justification were the building blocks used to shape today’s version of free grace theology.

Typically, doctrines develop over time as Bible scholars explore the depths of interrelated theological issues. Luther and Calvin’s rediscovery of Pauline theology set into motion a discussion resulting in a better understanding of free grace truths such as assurance of salvation and forensic justification. Today’s free grace theology is only building upon the groundbreaking work of those First Generation Reformers. Although Luther and Calvin did not have a perfect understanding of Pauline theology, nevertheless we can be thankful for what they did accomplish in their lifetime.

³⁷ Dr. Sinclair B. Ferguson, THE MARROW CONTROVERSY #01 HISTORICAL DETAILS The Marrow Controversy; a message preached on 2/2/2004.

Dr. Andy Woods describes the embryonic work of these Reformation pioneers:

We rejoice over the Reformers and should be grateful for them, although we do not idolize them. But we are thankful for all that they accomplished and the price that they paid—some of them paying with their own lives.

We also understand that the restoration that they led was very partial. It was very important, but was not complete.

Why did the Reformers not complete their hermeneutical revolution? Part of the answer may be simply that they got old and tired. They accomplished so much in their lifetimes—it was almost a super-human feat. To expect them to have done more may not be realistic. We must also realize that they carried much baggage with them from Catholicism into the Reformation. Remember—they had initially hoped to remain Catholic!

Also, remember that they were just people—just people that God used in a specific area. We have to understand them in the context in which they lived so that we can properly and fully learn from them.

Yet God is so good, and loves His church so much, that He raised up other people to complete the work that the Reformers began, and to do what they could not do.³⁸

The fact is that free grace is absolutely **NOT** a recent historical and theological aberration. Those who make that claim are sadly ignorant of church history.

³⁸ Andy Woods. *Ever Reforming: Dispensational Theology and the Completion of the Protestant Reformation* (Dispensational Publishing House) Kindle Edition.