

A RESPONSE TO WAYNE GRUDEM'S PERSPECTIVES ON
CONVERSION AND FREE GRACE THEOLOGY

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A Response to Wayne Grudem's perspectives on Conversion and Free Grace Theology

Wayne Grudem cares deeply for the church of God and desires to exalt the Lord Jesus Christ at every turn. His life's work has been devoted to researching and clarifying issues of supreme importance in a way that will bring greater glory to the Lord Jesus Christ. It is evident that there is little difference between what Grudem and Free Grace proponents desire to see: obedient saints who are daily experiencing an intimate walk with the Lord Jesus, submitting to Him and one another out of love and humble reverence. But this holy desire does not mean that there are not some important disagreements regarding the means to that end.

The study of the holy Scriptures is the study of the inerrant, while the study of church history is the study of the errant in light of the inerrant. Sola Scriptura is found in its purest sense when every movement, creed, and claim of orthodoxy is examined against the Word of God. Doing so leads to the fact that the Protestant Reformation was lacking in many areas. I do not wish to negate the good that came from the movement, nor the necessary clarification of justification by faith alone, but an honest investigation will admit that it was (and in part still is) threaded with Roman Catholic ties that will not allow for "faith alone in Christ alone" to truly represent the meaning of "sola."

In Grudem's latest work, great concern emerges as his views on *faith* and *repentance* are compared to the Bible. I have already addressed Grudem's position on some of these issues, showing that Catholic perspectives on *penance* are part and parcel to Grudem's view¹ and that *faith* has a clear biblical definition² despite Grudem providing his own.³ However, I believe that additional engagement is

¹ Jeremy D. Edmondson, "Free Grace Is Returning to Scripture as Our Sole Authority," in *Free Grace Theology: 5 Ways It Magnifies the Gospel* (Allen, TX: Bold Grace Ministries, 2016), 7-9.

² *Ibid.*, 11-19.

³ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, Second Edition. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 862.

necessary. Having surveyed his perspective on *faith* and *repentance*, I believe that there are two tenets that need to be addressed:

1. Grudem's extrabiblical definition of *faith*
2. Confusing the definition of "repentance" (*metanoia*) with "turning away" (*epistrephō*)

These tenets will be considered using examples from Grudem's chapter entitled "Conversion" in his *Systematic Theology, Second Edition* where the subjects of *faith*, *repentance*, and *assurance*, are addressed and then compared to Grudem's views on Free Grace Theology. The reader will be able to observe a repeated failure on Grudem's part to consider the surrounding context of a passage in determining the meaning of the verse(s) under consideration. Notable walls between Free Grace and Lordship convictions will be recognized with the hope of offering some helpful solutions for future discussions between the two sides.

AN EXTRABIBLICAL DEFINITION OF FAITH

Beginning with *faith*, Grudem writes, "We may therefore define saving faith in the following way: *saving faith is trust in Jesus Christ as a living person for forgiveness of sins and for eternal life with God.*"

He then notes that there are three elements to *saving faith*:

1. "it is necessary that we have some knowledge of who Christ is and what he has done,"
2. "knowing the facts and *approving* of them or *agreeing* that they are true is not enough," and
3. "I must decide to trust or depend on Jesus as a living person to save me."⁴

Grudem also describes *faith* as "wholehearted commitment to Christ," clarifying this assertion by stating that "commitment to Christ, if genuine, must include a commitment to turn *from* sin."⁵

Many within Free Grace would agree with Grudem's initial definition, but its subsequent elaboration asks much of the one in need of justification. Some immediate objections come to the front

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 870.

of the conversation when thinking about those who are “dead in their trespasses and sins” (Eph 2:1). How can an unregenerate person who is separated from God make a “wholehearted commitment to Christ” or make a “commitment to turn from sin?” Grudem places these requirements upon the individual to constitute *genuine faith* rather than seeing all requirements as being perfectly met in the sacrifice of Christ. Is Grudem calling for a synergistic salvation? While I applaud him for maintaining that one’s knowledge about Jesus Christ does not have to be extensive or academic, I cannot help but to shake my head at the notion that one must make a “wholehearted commitment” to someone without knowing much about them.

This is where the liberating tenets of Free Grace Theology come front and center:

- The sole means of receiving the free gift of eternal life is faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who died on the cross as our substitute, fully satisfying the requirement for our justification, and was raised bodily from the dead.

- Faith is a personal response, apart from our works, whereby we are persuaded that the finished work of Jesus Christ, His death and resurrection, has delivered us from condemnation and guaranteed our eternal life.

- The Gospel of Grace should always be presented with such clarity and simplicity that no impression is left that justification requires any step, response, or action in addition to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.⁶

Each tenet listed above maintains that the only work in salvation is that of the Lord Jesus, that His work is perfect and finished, and that the response to His work should be faith and faith alone. These are the primary convictions that sets Free Grace Theology apart from the Reformed and Arminian demands for “fruit” that have arrested Evangelicalism. With Free Grace, justification is allowed to remain an instantaneous event that occurs at the moment that one responds in faith to the hearing of the gospel (Rom 10:17).

⁶ Taken from The Free Grace Alliance, “Mission & Beliefs,” <https://freegracealliance.com/mission-and-beliefs>, accessed 1.21.2021

The Emphasis Issue Biblically Examined

Grudem summarizes his primary disagreement with Free Grace, stating “I still do not find in Free Grace literature nearly as much emphasis as we find in the New Testament on *trusting in Christ as a living Savior, coming to him, receiving him, and believing in him with one’s heart*” (emphasis original).⁷

The question that we must consider is: “What does the Bible say about each of these things?”

By his own admission, Grudem states that the notion of *trusting in Christ* is not a concept that can be supported biblically but stands as his own modification. “Because saving faith in Scripture involves this personal trust,” writes Grudem, “the word *trust* is a better word to use in contemporary culture than the words *faith* or *belief*. The reason is that we can believe something to be true with no personal commitment or dependence involved in it.”⁸ But does the Bible call one to *trust in Christ* or to *believe in the Lord Jesus Christ* (Acts 16:31)? Out of the modern-day English formal equivalence translations,⁹ only the NKJV uses the phrase *first trusted in Christ* in Ephesians 1:12. This is the only time that this occurs. Other formal equivalence translations choose to translate *proēlpikotas* as “first to hope” in Christ (ESV, NASB95, MEV), or “had put our hope” in Christ (HCSB, CSB). Clearly, the better option for this word is “hope,” not “trust,”¹⁰ thus showing that “trust” is not the biblical option.

Further addressing Grudem’s concerns on emphasis, Free Grace understands the Bible’s use of *coming to Christ* as a call to sanctification, which is a doctrine within the sphere of spiritual salvation that Free Grace advocates hold as being progressive and separate from the instantaneous doctrine of

⁷ Grudem, *Systematic*, 872.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 863.

⁹ A formal equivalence translation seeks to translate from the Hebrew and Greek manuscripts of the Old and New Testament in a word-for-word fashion. While this produces a more challenging English text to read, this method maintains a high level of accuracy from the source manuscripts. This would be in opposition to the dynamic equivalence translations which pursue a thought-for-thought rendering of the text, producing a more readable product that has sacrificed accuracy to make it so.

¹⁰ See William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 868. This is a lexicon that Grudem cites often to prove his points regarding the meanings and uses of Greek words. At no point in this definition does one find the idea, concept, or notion of *trust*. Hereafter, this work will be cited as BDAG.

justification. For instance, in Matthew 16:24 we read, “Then Jesus said to His disciples, ‘If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me.’” Jesus is speaking to those who were already disciples. They are His audience, not the unregenerate. Since Jesus is not calling His disciples to justification, we must conclude that He is calling them into deeper fellowship with Him. This verse is not about eternal life and the forgiveness of sins.

Moving Grudem’s concerns forward, if one were to consider emphasizing the phrase *receiving Him* or *receiving Jesus*, Colossians 2:6 would stand front and center, stating “Therefore as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him.” Notice that Paul demonstrates the difference between “receiving” Christ and “walking” in Him, showing a clear delineation between one’s justification and sanctification. Would Free Grace advocates hold that *receiving Christ* is an acceptable means of centralizing the Lord Jesus and the response of faith involved in one becoming a Christian? Yes, but we would still abstain from muddying the waters of justification with “wholehearted commitment,” “turning from sins,” and “releasing sin” from one’s life, all of which are emphasized by Grudem.¹¹ Such mandates place the responsibility upon the shoulders of the unregenerate sinner to enact them for God’s acceptance instead of emphasizing what Jesus Christ has already done to secure one’s acceptance before the Creator.

The final emphasis in Grudem’s concern is “believing in him with one’s heart.” There is nothing presented here that would be of any contention with Free Grace Theology. I believe that the greatest concern for both sides would be what the New Testament authors meant, and what one understands, by the use of “heart.” Of course, *kardia* does not mean the internal organ which pumps blood throughout the circulatory system of a living being, for that is a function that operates apart from conscience, making it incapable of a reasoned response. But we can understand “heart” as “the centre

¹¹ Grudem, *Systematic*, 866-870

of the inner life of man and the source or seat of all the forces and functions of soul and spirit.”¹² Herein we have the thrust of what it means to *believe* in Christ with one’s heart, and I believe this to be consistent and coherent with the New Testament record.

Grudem supports his defense for the necessity of works as an evidence of “genuine” faith by quoting many well-respected works from the annals of Protestant Church History. However, no Scripture is provided in his conclusion. Not one. He then addresses my personal contribution regarding the Scriptures as the foundation for Free Grace Theology¹³ drawing an oversimplification while making no attempt in exegetical interaction. He opts instead to create and quickly dismiss a straw man.¹⁴ This reaction is a disappointment.

The Bible Already Has a Definition for *Faith*

What is most glaring about Grudem’s chapter concerning conversion, and his discussion involving *faith* in particular, is that the Bible’s definition of *faith* in Hebrews 11:1 cannot be found.¹⁵ It is altogether absent, and yet it stands in Scripture as a clear description that is followed by a myriad of examples from Old Testament saints who lived “by faith.” While the argument can and should be made that the use of “by faith” in Hebrews 11 speaks more to the nature of how these believers lived in certain situations (which is a contextually true conclusion), I would also argue that such faith, whether for receiving eternal life or living an abundant life is the same. There are not different types of faith.

¹² Friedrich Baumgärtel and Johannes Behm, “Καρδία, Καρδιογνώστης, Σκληροκαρδία,” ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–), 611. Hereafter, this will be known as Kittel’s.

¹³ Edmondson, “Scripture as Our Sole Authority,” *Free Grace Theology*, 1-29.

¹⁴ Grudem, *Systematic*, 873-874.

¹⁵ For arguments surrounding this issue, see R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistle to the Hebrews and of the Epistle of James* (Columbus, OH: Lutheran Book Concern, 1938), 372–380, and David L. Allen, *Hebrews*, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2010), 541–543.

There is only one type of faith, regardless if it is exercised for justification or sanctification, and that faith is “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb 11:1b).

Throughout Grudem’s chapter, one finds such designations as “saving faith,” “genuine faith,” “New Testament faith,” “sincere faith,” and “initial saving faith.” The underlying notion that there is a “head faith” that does not save as opposed to a “heart faith” that does is a theological formulation made famous in Chick Tracts and not through a proper conclusion deduced by studying Hebrews 11:1.

Assurance, Biblically Based

As a final word in relation to *faith*, something must be said about Grudem’s focus on the assurance of the believer. He writes, “For those who advocate a Free Grace position, good works and continuing to believe do not necessarily follow from saving faith, and therefore, it is wrong to tell people to consider whether there has been a change in their life (‘good works’) and whether they are still trusting in Christ as factors that contribute to our assurance of salvation.”¹⁶ This is true. Good works and continuing to believe are not the inevitable results of faith. Eternal life and the forgiveness of sins is. But Free Grace would quickly add that a believer cannot experience intimacy with the Father or growth in their salvation apart from faith and good works. As previously stated, Free Grace chooses to keep instantaneous justification separate from the process of sanctification.

Free Grace advocates have no obligation to put forth the works of the believer, their persistence or failure to continue trusting in Christ in every instance, or the measurement of change in their life as factors that define one’s assurance. Grudem cannot answer the questions, “How many works are enough to validate one’s salvation?” “How much is one allowed to waver in their faith at any given moment and still know that they are saved?” “How do you measure the change in one’s life for them to

¹⁶ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 873.

have assurance and is it a 'one-size-fits-all' model for every Christian?" This sort of thinking cannot produce a coherent or consistent answer.

Why not look to the Scriptures for the assurance of salvation? Why not trust what is written in God's holy Word? When Jesus says, "he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life" (John 5:24), why not esteem that as true? When we read, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household" (Acts 16:31), why should we conclude that this is not enough? When we are told, "If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself" (2 Tim 2:13)" why can we not trust that God is telling us the truth about our eternal standing with Him? To think otherwise is clearly a symptom of unbelief in the Word of God due to an overemphasis on the expectations of man.

REPENTANCE OR SOMETHING ELSE?

Another point of consideration comes in Grudem's use of *epistrephō* ("turn") when seeking to strengthen his argument regarding *metanoia* ("repentance"). To clarify, the word *epistrephō* means "to return to a point where one has been," "to change direction," "to cause a person to change belief or course of conduct, with focus on the thing to which one turns," and "to change one's mind or course of action, for better or worse."¹⁷ This is often expressed in translation as "turn," "turning away," or "return." The word *metanoia* (and also *metanoēō* meaning "repent") is defined as "change one's mind," "a change of mind," "repentance, turning about, conversion," and "feel remorse, repent, be converted."¹⁸ In definition alone, there are some similarities between the two words, but Grudem's comments surrounding his emphasis on *repentance* only generates confusion.

¹⁷ *BDAG*, 382.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 640–641.

The following quote provides a succinct example:

Scripture puts repentance and faith together as different aspects of the one act of coming to Christ for salvation. It is not that a person first turns from sin and later trusts in Christ or first trusts in Christ and later turns from sin; both occur at the same time. When we turn *to* Christ for salvation from our sins, we are simultaneously turning *away* from the sins that we are asking Christ to save us from. If that were not true, our turning to Christ for salvation from sin could hardly be a genuine turning to him or trusting in him.¹⁹

Free Grace theologians do not disagree with the idea of *turning* in regards to justification, for the Bible plainly teaches this concept. However, this *turning* should not be understood as *repentance*. For instance, we read “But to this day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their heart; but whenever a person *turns* to the Lord, the veil is taken away” (2 Cor 3:15-16, emphasis mine). In another place we see “For they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you *turned* to God from idols to serve a living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come” (1 Thess 1:9-10, emphasis mine).

Despite Grudem’s insistence that a genuine turning from sin is the essence of repentance,²⁰ the word used in both passages is not *metanoia* but *epistrephō*. If the Apostle Paul intended to convey that repentance had occurred, we should see it in the text. Since both passages clearly communicate an unregenerate-to-regenerate situation, the *turning away* that takes place on the part of the believer is clearly a response to hearing the gospel of Jesus Christ. However, one cannot conclude that the “turning away” is what is understood biblically as *repentance*.²¹

Interesting enough, Grudem proves this point. “When Scripture speaks of trusting in God or in Christ, it frequently connects such trust with genuine repentance. For example, Isaiah gives an eloquent

¹⁹ Grudem, *Systematic*, 866.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ “Turns” is simply stated as being “to the Lord” in 2 Corinthians 3:15-16, while 1 Thessalonians 1:9-10 speaks of turning away from idols.

testimony that is typical of the message of many of the Old Testament prophets.”²² Grudem then quotes

Isaiah 55:6-7 which reads:

Seek the Lord while He may be found;
Call upon Him while He is near.
Let the wicked forsake his way
And the unrighteous man his thoughts;
And let him *return* to the Lord,
And He will have compassion on him,
And to our God,
For He will abundantly pardon (emphasis mine).

He then concludes his point stating, “Here both repentance from sin and coming to God for pardon are mentioned.”²³ If one were to search the formal equivalence translations of the English Bible, not one of them understands “*return to the Lord*” as *repent* or *repentance*. This translation decision was made for a good reason. In translating the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek, the intertestamental scribes opted to use the word *epistrephō*, not *metanoia*. The concept of “returning” to the Lord is the point of the text, but again, (biblically speaking) *repentance* is not.

Biblical Evidence for “Change One’s Mind”

Grudem is also thoroughly convinced that *repentance* cannot mean “a change of mind.” He observes that “the standard academic dictionary for New Testament Greek, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* by Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich, does give the meaning ‘change one’s mind’ as the first possible meaning of the verb *metanoieō* (“to repent”), but it is significant that they do not list any New Testament verse as having that particular meaning.”²⁴ The conclusion that Grudem wishes for his readers to deduce is that the understanding of “change one’s

²² Grudem, *Systematic*, 867.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 868.

mind” is never the meaning of *repentance* in the New Testament based on this lexical evidence.

However, an examination of the text of Scripture proves otherwise.

Looking to Luke 15, one will observe that Jesus provides three parables for the Pharisees and scribes because of their legalistic opinions regarding the people who were listening to Jesus teach (Luke 15:1-2). The first parable concerns one hundred sheep of which one goes missing (15:4-7), the second involves a woman who had ten coins and loses one (15:8-10), and the final parable concerns the prodigal son (15:11-32). Jesus draws a close to the first parable after the lost sheep is found by stating, “in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance” (15:7). What does Jesus mean by “repents” and “repentance?” The first parable does not tell us. In fact, the action involved is that of the shepherd who goes out to retrieve the sheep. When he finds the sheep, he lays it upon his shoulders and brings it home. Then he celebrates with his friends (15:5-6). The sheep does nothing, yet in His application Jesus speaks of “one sinner who repents” (15:7). What does Jesus mean by *repent*?

Moving to the second parable, the lost coin is found after the woman lights a lamp and sweeps the house, searching carefully for her beloved piece (15:8). Having found the coin, she calls for her friends to rejoice with her (15:9), yet we can observe that the coin did nothing to be found. Much in the same way as before, Jesus applies this principle stating, “In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (15:10). What does Jesus mean by *repent*? Again, we are not told.

In His third parable, that of the prodigal son, Jesus speaks of a young man who asks for his inheritance before his father’s demise (which would have been considered culturally repulsive) and strikes out to squander his newly obtained wealth on the pleasures of the flesh. Being in a distant country, his funds run dry and he finds himself having to make some otherwise detestable choices

(15:12-16). We then come upon Jesus' meaning of the word "repent" in the context even though the actual word is not used in this third parable. Having hit rock bottom, Luke 15:17 says, "But *when he came to his senses*, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger!'" (emphasis mine). Could this have included an element of humility? Certainly, but the emphasis in the text is that the prodigal was not thinking straight and that he needed to come to his senses. He needed a change of mind.

Therefore, we see that Jesus sets forth His understanding of *repent* and *repentance* but chooses to do so contextually. Jesus is clear that repentance (in these instances) is when an erring human being comes to his senses about what is really true, right, and good. Grudem defines *repentance* as "a heartfelt sorrow for sin, a renouncing of it, and a sincere commitment to forsake it and walk in obedience to Christ."²⁵ Yet this is not what we see in this chapter of Scripture.²⁶

This same idea can be seen in 2 Timothy 2:24-26 when Paul writes to his son in the faith regarding his conduct and the influence that it can have on those who oppose sound doctrine. By correcting an opponent with gentleness, Paul notes that "perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may *come to their senses* and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will" (v.25b-26, emphasis mine). Should we conclude from this use of *repentance* that Paul means that God may grant them "a heartfelt sorrow for sin, a renouncing of it, and a sincere commitment to forsake it and walk in obedience to Christ"?²⁷

²⁵ Ibid., 865.

²⁶ Furthermore, it should be considered that this chapter in Luke 15 is not talking about the sheep, coin, and son as being "lost" in a spiritual sense, as if they needed justification. All three of these examples started out as part of the whole and went astray. Regardless of their lot in life, whether that is being "lost" or purposely living for self, each one is precious to the one looking for them. Each one needs to be brought back to be a part of the whole. Jesus' parables answer the legalistic attitudes of the Pharisees and scribes perfectly (Luke 15:1-2).

²⁷ Grudem, *Systematic*, 865.

Contextually, this would be an impossible conclusion. Paul is clear that the opponents may “come to their senses,” which corresponds perfectly with the understanding of “a change of mind.”

The Flip-Side of Faith?

One verse that Grudem uses to show the necessity of *repentance* as the flip-side of *faith* in one’s conversion is Acts 20:21.²⁸ Here we read that Paul preached to Jews and to Gentiles about “repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.” The word used for “repentance” is the *metanoia*. As seen above, “a change of mind” is a sound, biblical understanding of this word, provided that the context does not point the reader in another direction. At no point does the text direct us to consider that *repentance* and *faith* must occur simultaneously, nor does Paul supply repentance as something that is indispensable to his recorded offers of the gospel as seen elsewhere in Acts. We do not find it included in Acts 16:30-34, but what we do find is that Luke mentions that the jailer “rejoiced greatly, having *believed* in God with his whole household” (Acts 16:34, emphasis mine). One may conclude that repentance is included in the mention of “faith” (and by this, we mean Grudem’s definition of *faith*), but if we return to how the Bible defines “faith” (Heb 11:1), this does not qualify as a biblical conclusion.

When Paul comments on the message of John the Baptist in Acts 19, he states, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in Him who was coming after him, that is, in Jesus” (Acts 19:4). In this verse, Paul mentions baptism, but only as a precursor, emphasizing instead the vital necessity of believing in Jesus. We know this to be true because his audience had already been baptized in John’s baptism (Acts 19:3b). However, these men had missed the main point that this

²⁸ Ibid., 866, 869. Grudem also uses 2 Corinthians 7:9-10 as a passage to bolster his view. I have chosen not to address this passage because it is written to believers, not unbelievers. In addition, the passage does not speak of repentance involving sorrow, but that sorrow leads to repentance. -See Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, III (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), 372-373. It is also worth noting that Grudem makes the mistake of understanding “salvation” in this passage as referring to justification. Others have already written on this interpretive error and its frequent connection with the Lordship Salvation. -See Joseph C. Dillow, *Final Destiny: The Future Reign of the Servant Kings* (Houston, TX: Grace Theology Press, 2017), 46.

baptism was preparing them for. Clearly, baptism did not save them, just as it does not save now.

Neither does repentance save someone, just as it does not save them now. But what is certain is that faith in Christ Jesus the Lord can save anyone, anywhere, and at any time. Again, Paul is clear. Even though John's baptism was a baptism of repentance, these men were still unregenerate though they had participated in it. But when Paul told them about Jesus Christ, they were then baptized in His name and the Holy Spirit came upon them (Acts 19:5-6). How did this happen? By faith alone in Christ alone.

One final occurrence that clears up much of the confusion is Acts 26:19-20. Giving his defense, Paul unfolds his message.

So, King Agrippa, I did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision, but kept declaring both to those of Damascus first, and also at Jerusalem and then throughout all the region of Judea, and even to the Gentiles, that they should *repent* and *turn* to God, performing deeds appropriate to *repentance* (emphasis mine).

In this passage three things are emphasized. First, people should "repent." There is no question about this. But what does Paul mean by "repent?" The word used here is *metanoēō*. This is understood as "a change of mind" due to the other two emphasized parts of verse 20. The word used for "turn" is *epistrephō*, being correctly translated as "turn," with such turning being a result of changing their minds about God. The final emphasis is on the performance of deeds that are "appropriate to repentance." Clearly, works ("performance") stand as something separate from repentance, being established as deeds that should flow out from it. What is *repentance*? Not turning, nor works, but a change of mind.

Instead of concluding that Acts 20:21 promotes the idea that *repentance* and *faith* are two sides of the same coin of conversion, it may be better to understand it as sequential, much like what is seen in Acts 11:18 when Luke writes, "God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life." This is a clear statement. When the Gentiles repent, it leads to life. They do not repent for eternal life.

LORDSHIP SALVATION

Grudem addresses the “Lordship Salvation” issue with a balanced understanding, writing “both sides agree that Jesus is Lord of our lives *in some sense* and is not fully Lord of our lives *in another sense*.”²⁹ I cannot help but to be grateful for this and wish that such understanding between both sides would be reciprocated. He then writes, “when the Free Grace proponents refer to the position that disagrees with them as the ‘Lordship salvation’ position, they wrongly suggest that this is an unusual or minority view that seeks to add the idea of ‘Lordship’ to the ordinary idea of salvation.”³⁰ Free Grace Theology would disagree with this assessment. The writings of John MacArthur, R.C. Sproul, John Piper, and others who champion this theological construct have ventured largely into the popular Christian market, having their products selling in the tens of thousands and gaining a large following to their particular beliefs.

It is not that Free Grace believes that the Lordship view is a minority view in any sense, nor do we hold that the term “Lordship Salvation” is a designation that presupposes it to be “some new doctrine” as Grudem concludes.³¹ Nor do we believe “Lordship Salvation” to be a pejorative term, but one that correctly and succinctly represents this perspective. It is that we believe it to be contrary to the New Testament teaching on salvation, ultimately corrupting grace by necessitating works.

Grudem finishes this section by stating, “what the Free Grace movement calls the ‘Lordship Salvation’ view has been the mainstream Protestant view since the Reformation. It is not a novel or minority view at all, for it has been held by all the main branches of Protestantism.”³² This statement brings the issue full circle. The creeds of church history may serve to embolden a theological persuasion,

²⁹ Ibid., 875

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 876.

³² Ibid., 876

but it is by no means the basis of it. Regardless of what was believed or accomplished in the Protestant Reformation, it does not hold sway upon the Word of God. Our concern should be over the proper interpretation of the text. That, and that alone, gets at the heart of what the Holy Spirit intended through the human author at the time that it was written, and only there should the arguments lie.

GRUDEM'S CONCLUDING THOUGHTS ON FREE GRACE THEOLOGY

This section is the most perplexing of all. While Grudem seeks to be gracious and irenic to our position, he does so in the form of a contradiction. He writes,

The Free Grace movement preaches a weakened gospel because it avoids any call for people to repent of their sins. This is no minor matter because repentance from sin is such an important part of the gospel in many New Testament summaries and presentations (see above) that it cannot be omitted without grave consequences in the lives of people who hear such a weakened message.

*However, I am not willing to say that the Free Grace Gospel is a "false gospel." That is far too strong a category to apply here, and it calls to mind Paul's extremely strong condemnation in Galatians 1:6–10. I think it is certainly possible to distinguish between a *true gospel* that is presented in an incomplete or weakened form (such as with Free Grace teaching) and a *false gospel* that simply proclaims falsehood rather than truth about Jesus Christ and his work of redemption (emphasis mine).³³*

How can this be? Grudem's chapter on Conversion hammers the importance of *faith* and *repentance* being two necessary sides of the same coin.³⁴ Yet his summary speaks of the Free Grace understanding of the gospel as *weakened*. How is this not a contradiction?³⁵ While Grudem provides some possible instances of seeing a "changed life" in those who have interacted with Free Grace Theology, or even that one was attending a Free Grace church and then later repented "perhaps as they begin reading the Bible, and at that point they first come to genuine saving faith,"³⁶ I find this to be a series of logical scenarios that stem from his assumptions on conversion and not from any firsthand interviews. While

³³ Ibid., 877.

³⁴ Ibid., 866-867.

³⁵ Grudem seeks to answer this obvious conclusion on page 877, fn 41, but is unconvincing in his argument.

³⁶ Grudem, *Systematic*, 877.

the Lord can always use an imperfect gospel presentation to draw people to Christ, there cannot be a sound gospel and a weakened gospel. If Grudem is correct in his assessment of the gospel message as promoted by Free Grace proponents, then “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16) is nothing more than a *weakened* gospel presentation because it excludes *repentance*.

THE WALLS BETWEEN US

It is no secret that a definitive set of barriers stand between those of the Lordship persuasion and Free Grace advocates. It would be prudent to identify these obstacles with the hope of seeing a solution that brings us to a common ground that is coherent with the biblical text. It is no coincidence that Grudem touches upon some of these walls in his chapter.

The first wall in place is the refusal to have an exegetical dialogue over the text of Scripture. What has been presented is a dogmatic adherence to a systematic treatise. As stated before, there is little exegetical engagement on Grudem’s part to interact with the textual observations of Free Grace proponents. Scholars who support the Free Grace cause are quoted, but never in relation to their interpretation on a given passage. In fact, within the section that addresses Free Grace Theology exclusively (p. 871-878) there are only two Scripture references and both instances contain no exegetical engagement. Free Grace Theology wants to discuss the text; not quotes, creeds, dogmas, or confessions. We want to discuss the Scriptures.

A second wall sees assumptions that lead to dismissal. Because my viewpoint does not match that of Wayne Grudem, I must be wrong and he must be right, no questions asked. Because certain periods of church history stand in agreement with his work and convictions, Free Grace must be a left-

field concoction that is implausible because of its “recent” invention.³⁷ Because Free Grace has not secured its book rights with a major publisher,³⁸ no credibility could possibly stand within their ranks. Yet, Grudem’s connection with mainstream publishers (Zondervan being the publisher of this work in question) should give him greater clout among the believers of the world.

If our genuine concern is really over the integrity of the gospel and the truth of Scripture as meant by the original authors when they wrote the text, one simple way to correct this “superior/inferior” dichotomy would be to have a two-sided discussion over the passages of Scripture where our interpretations have divided us. This work could then be distributed by a mainstream publisher at cost so that the matter of truth is the only focus. Again, the text of Scripture is where the arguments should be made.

The final wall that presents itself is in the startling absence of the doctrine of the Judgment Seat of Christ when discussing Free Grace Theology. If Wayne Grudem is to write at all on the convictions of Free Grace, he will properly identify and represent the differences that we hold in justification and sanctification and the resultant teaching made regarding the rewarding of believers in glory. Grudem addresses rewards briefly in another chapter (p. 1409-1410), but the subject is wholly absent from his objections to Free Grace Theology.

The Bema Seat of Christ is an indispensable doctrine that safeguards against the misinterpretation of many passages of Scripture. The most common error by Lordship proponents is evidenced in the interpretation of passages pertaining to sanctification/rewards as if it were dealing with the subject of justification. For instance, Grudem cites the rich young ruler as an incident that involves justification, stressing that his refusal to part with his possessions shows his refusal to repent of sin

³⁷ Refuting this idea, see Fred Chay, “The Perennial Problem for Protestants,” in *A Defense of Free Grace Theology*, ed. Fred Chay (The Woodlands, TX: Grace Theology Press, 2017), 21-25.

³⁸ Grudem, *Systematic*, 871, fn 15.

(maintaining that *faith* and *repentance* are combined in his understanding of “conversion”).³⁹ But Luke 18:18-30 shows that the main point of this passage is living a life that will merit reward in heaven. This can be clearly discerned by:

1. The man’s inquiry in what he must “do” (clearly implying a work involved) to “inherit” eternal life (a term denoting inheritance, not justification),

2. Jesus replies with two “works” answers: the first in v. 20 and the second in v.22,

3. Jesus tells the man that if he will sell his possession and give to the poor that he “shall have treasure in heaven” (v.22b),

4. Jesus tells him twice that “the kingdom of God” is the issue at hand: once in v. 24 and again in v. 25.,

5. The question about “Then who can be saved?” (v.26) should not be assumed to speak of justification since the surrounding context is pointing the reader to the subject of rewards. “Saved” can also mean “rescued, delivered, healed,” and can spiritually apply to sanctification and glorification, not solely justification.⁴⁰ If this were speaking about justification, one would have to conclude by the preceding dialogue that being wealthy is what demonstrates that one is “saved,” a notion that Grudem would surely disagree with.

6. Jesus answers Peter’s statement about leaving their homes (an observation emphasizing works- v.28) with a reply that speaks of one’s sacrifice for the sake of God’s kingdom being rewarded with “many times as much” (v.30b). Jesus then speaks of “eternal life” as something future, in the “age to come” (v.30c), bringing greater contextual clarity to how He understood the inquiry of the rich young ruler in v.18.

7. When considering the parallel account found in Matthew 19:16-30, even greater evidence is presented that this scenario deals with works and reward, not justification and heaven and hell. In Matthew 19:28, Jesus speaks of the “regeneration,” which is clarified as a time that Jesus would sit on His throne. We understand this to be referring to the future Millennial Kingdom of Christ’s reign (Rev 20:4). We then see that Jesus assures Peter and the others that their sacrifice for the kingdom of heaven will not go unnoticed, telling them that they will sit on twelve thrones and judge the twelve tribes of Israel (Matt 19:28b). Everything surrounding this explanation concerns glorification and the exalted position of those who are faithful and sacrificial now on Earth.

This idea continues as Jesus states:

And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for My name’s sake, will receive many times as much, and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last; and the last, first (Matt 19:29-30).

³⁹ Grudem, *Systematic*, 870.

⁴⁰ *BDAG*, 982–983, Joseph Henry Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Being Grimm’s Wilke’s Clavis Novi Testamenti* (New York: Harper & Brothers., 1889), 610–611, Werner Foerster, “Σώζω, Σωτηρία, Σωτήρ, Σωτήριος,” Kittel’s, 965–969.

Jesus' continued emphasis is on personal sacrifice for His name's sake. Such sacrifice will be rewarded with those inheriting eternal life.⁴¹ This speaks to the prize earned, not the gift freely given. He then notes that those who are first in this life will be last in the life to come (the "regeneration") while those who are last now will be first. All of this is surrounded by works, the coming kingdom, and future reward for believers who choose to sacrifice now.

From these seven observations, we can see that the rich young ruler is a believer who is inquiring about great reward (this is why he uses the word "inherit" -v.18), and that reward is contingent upon the works of the believer for the kingdom of God (v.29-30). If this account is about justification, Jesus is teaching that salvation is by works and that the "reward" is eternity, being earned only by parting with the things that one holds dear. From Grudem's perspective, Jesus is teaching works-righteousness.

In combining justification and sanctification, or in interpreting sanctification/rewards passages as justification, we have seen the rise of Lordship Salvation within the Church, placing the Body of Christ under a yoke of slavery by demanding an obedience that is adding to faith alone in Christ alone. The conviction of Free Grace advocates in maintaining these biblical distinctions rests in the fear of testing Almighty God (Acts 15:10).

CONCLUSION

In the end, the ultimate question is "does each side have a reason to change their views regarding how God works and what He requires in salvation?" While I cannot answer for Grudem, my response would be an emphatic "no." The evidence presented by Grudem finds its cogency with church

⁴¹ In Luke 19:16, the man is recorded as asking Jesus what he must do to "obtain" (ecw) eternal life, which is different when compared to the use of "inherit" in Mark 10:17 and Luke 18:18. Seeing that "obtain" can be understood as "possess as one's own," this is not a significant difficulty. See *BDAG*, 420–422.

history, creeds, and systematic conclusions and I believe that the Bible speaks to more than what he has considered in shaping his theology for his chapter on Conversion.

As a pastor, I find Grudem's conclusions alarming. Any seeking saint that desired to understand such weighty concepts from a skilled scholar would be forced to conclude that the history of the church over time has a greater stake in determining how one should embrace the doctrines of *faith*, *repentance*, and *assurance* than I am comfortable with. Scripture alone is inerrant. It is sufficient to tell us all that we need to know. We do not need tradition to form our theology.

Moving forward, I would hope that these disagreements could be discussed over open Bibles, with brotherly love, and a nice cup of coffee. If Grudem is willing, I will gladly pay the bill.