

## What Is the Message of the Gospel?

*By Bob Nyberg*

There seems to be much confusion today regarding the message of the gospel. Even those within the free grace camp are divided on this issue. The traditional free grace camp agrees with the apostle Paul's definition of the gospel found in First Corinthians 15.

For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures. –1 Corinthians 15:3-4 (NKJV)

Yet some claim that belief in Paul's summary of the gospel is insufficient for a person to be saved. For instance, in an article titled "*Is Lordship Salvation a Saving Message?*" Bob Wilkin writes:

Some (many?) in Free Grace circles believe the following is true: Anyone who believes that Jesus is God and that He died on the cross for our sins and rose bodily from the dead on the third day is born again.

Well, Lordship Salvation people believe that. So do Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Church of Christ, Assemblies of God, and so forth. Most who call themselves Christians believe that.<sup>1</sup>

While this line of reasoning might sound good on the surface, it is simply a straw man argument. In First Corinthians 15, Paul summarizes the content of the gospel message in a nutshell. Elsewhere, Paul explains what it means to believe in Christ for salvation.

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. –Ephesians 2:8-9 (NKJV)

He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy.... –Titus 3:5 (NASB)

It is not a question of just believing in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. Rather, it is a question of trusting in His death, burial, and resurrection alone to be saved from the penalty of our sins. The question, simply put, is this: What are you trusting in to be saved? Are you trusting in Christ alone? Or are you trusting in Christ plus something else? Parishioners in Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches claim to believe in Christ's death, burial and resurrection. Yet, many are actually trusting in their own works to save them. At best, they believe that Christ paid for part of their sin debt, but they have to pay the rest. Rather than trusting in Christ alone, they are trusting in Christ plus their own efforts.

The Reformers sought to restore the biblical doctrine that justification before God is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. He graciously saves us on the basis of faith in Christ alone. This was the position that the Reformers defended and that the Roman Catholic Church condemned at the Council of Trent.

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<sup>1</sup> Wilkin, Bob. *Is Lordship Salvation a Saving Message?* <https://faithalone.org/blog/is-lordship-salvation-a-saving-message/> (accessed Oct. 4, 2024).

Martin Luther was a Roman Catholic monk who saw through the works-based salvation of that religion. Through the study of God's Word, he came to see that salvation is by faith alone (*Sola Fide*), apart from any works.

Martin Luther considered justification by faith alone to be the article on which the church stands or falls. He taught that it is by faith alone that we receive the righteousness of Christ. Luther came to this understanding by studying the book of Romans.

According to Luther, we are righteous not by virtue of our works, but by virtue of the righteousness of Christ. We are declared righteous by God's word. We receive this righteousness by faith alone. Luther said that the righteousness from God does not consist in a recognition of anything we have done.

Martin Luther stated that *sola fide* (faith alone) was the principal cause of the Protestant Reformation.

John Calvin taught that "everyone who would obtain the righteousness of Christ must renounce his own righteousness."

According to Calvin, it is only because the sinner is able to obtain the good standing of the Son of God, through faith in Him, and union with Him, that sinners have any hope of pardon from, acceptance by, and peace with God.

To argue that those from the Roman Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodox Church, the Church of Christ, etc., also believe in the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ misses the whole point of the Reformation. The issue is faith alone versus faith plus works.

I am reminded of a story about an atheist who was deployed to Vietnam during the 1960's.

During the Vietnam War, there was a young soldier who was a declared atheist. He had always been skeptical of religion and believed that faith was unnecessary. However, as the war progressed and he found himself on the front lines, his perspective began to change.

One day, a fellow soldier noticed something unusual about him. The atheist soldier was wearing a cross around his neck, a small Buddha figurine in his pocket, and a lucky rabbit's foot attached to his gear. Curious, the fellow soldier asked, "Why are you carrying all these religious symbols? I thought you didn't believe in any of this."

The atheist soldier looked at him with a weary smile and replied, "When you're on the front lines, you can't afford to offend anyone. Out there, you need all the help you can get, from any source available."

Just because the soldier wore a cross around his neck did not imply that he was trusting in Christ alone for salvation.

If Bob Wilkin rejects Paul's gospel found in First Corinthians 15, then what is the gospel according to Wilkin and the Grace Evangelical Society? In the previously mentioned article, Bob writes:

GES had a big falling out at our 2006 annual conference, our biggest ever. Zane Hodges and Bob Bryant said in plenary messages that assurance is of the essence of saving faith. Actually, Zane gave a similar message back in 1997 at our annual conference. And he had written about it many times. But in 2006, the issue sparked a fire.

In a rap session on Wednesday afternoon, most of the 360 conferees were in a big meeting room interacting. The discussion was supposed to be about everything taught thus far in the conference. But it became all about whether a person is not born again until he knows that the salvation he has received from the Lord is irrevocable. I decided to ask for a show of hands to the question, “How many were sure you were secure forever when you believed in Christ?” About half raised their hands. “How many were not sure you were secure forever when you believed in Christ?” Again, about half raised their hands.

As an aside, they all indicated that they had come to believe that they are secure. They just thought that gaining that belief was a nice sanctification bonus, not a condition for the new birth. I’d say they all were born again when they believed that their salvation was irrevocable.... I think they have a flawed understanding of when they came to faith.

For Wilkin and the Grace Evangelical Society, the one and only issue is whether a person believes in the guarantee of Jesus for everlasting life. Bob Wilkin writes, “The person who is born again is the one who has come to believe that by faith in Jesus Christ he has everlasting life.... The issue is believing *in Jesus* for the life He guarantees (emphasis original).”<sup>2</sup>

Dr. J.B. Hixson explains Wilkin’s position:

According to Wilkin, “the gospel” does not save anyone. Rather, eternal salvation comes only by believing that *Jesus guarantees eternal life*. As long as someone believes that promise, even if he has no idea that Jesus is the Son of God, who died and rose again for his sins, that person is saved. Wilkin writes, “There is really one thing we must believe to be born again and it’s summed up in three words: *believe, Jesus, and (everlasting) life*. To be born again, eternally saved, all one needs to do is believe that Jesus Christ guarantees everlasting life to all who simply believe in Him for it.”<sup>3</sup>

The gospel according to the traditional free grace position is all about the person and work of Christ. In contrast, the gospel according to the Grace Evangelical Society is all about Jesus’ *guarantee of eternal life*. In fact, according to them, you don’t need to know anything about the person and the work of Christ.

Zane Hodges illustrated the GES position in what has become known as The Desert Island Scenario:

Try to imagine an unsaved person marooned on a tiny, uninhabited island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. He has never heard about Christianity in his life. One day a wave washes a fragment of paper up onto the beach. It is wet but still partly readable. On that paper are the words of John 6:43–47. But the only readable portions are: ‘Jesus therefore answered and said to them’ (v 43) and ‘Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life’ (v 47). Now suppose that our unsaved man somehow becomes convinced that this person called Jesus can guarantee his eternal future, since He promises everlasting life. In other words, he believes Jesus’ words in John 6:47. Is he saved? I suspect that there are some [free] grace people who would say that this man is not saved because he doesn’t know

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<sup>2</sup> Bob Wilkin, “Five Current Confusions Concerning the Gospel,” *Grace In Focus*, March-April 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Hixson, J. B. *Getting the Gospel Wrong: The Evangelical Crisis No One Is Talking About*. Revised Edition. Duluth, MN: Grace Gospel Press, 2013. Print.

enough. For example, he doesn't know that Jesus died for his sins on the cross and rose again the third day... But why is he *not* saved if he believes the promise of Jesus' words? It is precisely the ability of Jesus to guarantee eternal life that makes Him the Christ in the Johannine sense of that term... If we believe that Jesus is the One who guarantees our eternal destiny, we have believed all we absolutely have to believe in order to be saved... That's why the man on the deserted island can get saved with only the barest minimum of information. When he believes John 6:47 he is believing in Jesus as the Christ....<sup>4</sup>

Bob Wilkin wrote about an issue that came up at the annual 2006 GES conference, which resulted in 'a big falling out.' During that conference, Zane Hodges and Bob Bryant said that *assurance is of the essence of saving faith*. This became the foundation for the GES position that the gospel is *Jesus' guarantee of eternal life* and nothing more.

The teaching that *assurance is of the essence of saving faith* was a key component of the Reformation. But this must be understood in light of Luther and Calvin's opposition to the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. One of the significant differences between the Reformers and the Roman Catholic Church had to do with assurance of salvation.

At the Council of Trent, the Roman Catholic Church declared:

"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."

"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."

In contrast, the Reformers taught that believers could have assurance of salvation. Dr. Robert L. Dabney wrote:

[Luther and Calvin] ... 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....<sup>5</sup>

Martin Luther and John Calvin taught assurance of salvation, whereas the Roman Catholic Church opposed this position. Instead, it claimed that salvation is a process that involves cooperation with God's grace through faith, good works, and participation in the sacraments.

Luther and Calvin taught that assurance is an immediate and integral part of saving faith, while the Roman Catholic Church views assurance as conditional and dependent on one's ongoing cooperation with grace. Luther and Calvin emphasized faith alone for assurance. In contrast, the Roman Catholic Church teaches that good works, in cooperation with grace, are necessary for salvation.

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<sup>4</sup> Zane C. Hodges, "How to Lead People to Christ: Part. 1, The Content of Our Message," *JOTGES* 13:2 (Autumn 2000) 4.

<sup>5</sup> Dabney, R. L. *Discussions of Robert L. Dabney, Vol. I*, pp. 215-16. The Banner of Truth Trust. Print.

Luther and Calvin did indeed maintain that *assurance is of the essence of saving faith*. However, that is far different than what the Grace Evangelical Society means by that statement.

What does the idea that *assurance is of the essence of saving faith* mean exactly? Does that mean a believer will never have doubts about their salvation? Absolutely not! Does that mean a believer is guaranteed to persevere in their faith to the very end of their life? Not at all.

Assurance is simply taking God at His Word and believing that God forgives those who place their faith in the sacrifice of His Son on the cross of Calvary to pay for the penalty of sins.

When we trust in Jesus Christ, our eternal security in Him becomes a spiritual reality whether we understand it or believe it. One's belief in security in Christ does not make it true or false. If we have trusted in the person and work of Christ for personal salvation, our security is a fact.

Assurance is the confident realization that one possesses eternal life as a result of trusting Christ as Savior. This assurance can be realized by the brand-new believer in Jesus Christ. The doctrinal statement of Dallas Theological Seminary reflects this truth:

We believe it is the privilege, not only of some, but of all who are born again by the Spirit through faith in Christ as revealed in the Scriptures, to be assured of their salvation from the very day they take Him to be their Savior ... wholly upon the testimony of God in His written Word.<sup>6</sup>

The message of the gospel is fundamentally about faith in the person and work of Christ alone for salvation. The confusion within the free grace camp and the broader Christian community often stems from differing interpretations of what constitutes saving faith. The traditional free grace position, rooted in the teachings of the apostle Paul, emphasizes that salvation is by grace through faith in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, without reliance on personal works. This view aligns with the principles of the Reformation, which sought to restore the biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone (*sola fide*).

The Grace Evangelical Society's perspective, which focuses on the assurance of eternal life as the essence of saving faith, diverges from the traditional understanding by minimizing the necessity of knowing the person and work of Christ. This has led to significant theological debates and divisions within the free grace community.

Ultimately, the core issue remains whether one trusts in Christ alone for salvation or in Christ plus their own efforts. The Reformers, such as Martin Luther and John Calvin, emphasized that assurance of salvation is an integral part of saving faith, contrasting with the Roman Catholic Church's view that salvation involves cooperation with God's grace through faith and works.

Believers can have confidence in their eternal security by trusting in the person and work of Christ based on the testimony of God's Word. This assurance is available to all who place their faith in Jesus Christ as affirmed by the doctrinal statement of Dallas Theological Seminary.

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<sup>6</sup> Dallas Theological Seminary Doctrinal Statement Article XI. <https://www.dts.edu/about/what-we-believe/doctrinal-statement/>