



Introduction to Free Grace Theology

Posted by Dr. Fred Chay | Jan 25, 2021 | 0 🗨️ |



I would like to give you a sneak preview of our latest book. It should be available in March 2021, called *Living by Grace*. I invite you to read part of the opening chapter by the Founder and President of Grace School of Theology, Dr. Dave Anderson. In it, he provides a basic description of free grace theology. The following chapters look at the theology of grace, and how it manifests itself in everyday life.

Introduction to Free Grace Theology

By: Dr. Dave Anderson

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When I was in seminary long, long ago in a galaxy far, far away, “free grace” (afterwards FG) was not a phrase we heard much about. It first came to my attention in the ‘90s. Initially, it came into use to describe an approach to the gospel that opposed what has come to be known as “lordship salvation.” John MacArthur came out with his book *The Gospel According to Jesus* in support of the lordship position. Zondervan had published his book but did not want to identify with that position alone, so they asked Zane Hodges, who taught in the Greek department for Dallas Theological Seminary (afterwards DTS) for over twenty years, to write a rejoinder to MacArthur. He wrote *Absolutely Free*. MacArthur’s book defended a view that one must surrender completely to the lordship of Christ by committing one’s will to obey every command of Jesus in order to go to heaven. Hodges defended the view (indicated by the title of his book) that getting to heaven was a free gift from God to us. The only requirement for receiving this gift was our faith in God’s offer.

Though the debate is much more nuanced than just determining the requirement(s) for entering heaven, that question alone, first voiced by the Philippian jailer to Paul (“What must I do to be saved”—Acts 16:31), has preoccupied church history for centuries. One’s answer has a profound effect on people in the pew. I once went with an elder in my church to interview a woman for church membership. She began asking us questions like the one above. When we explained that simple trust in the person and work of Jesus Christ was the only requirement, she

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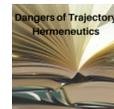
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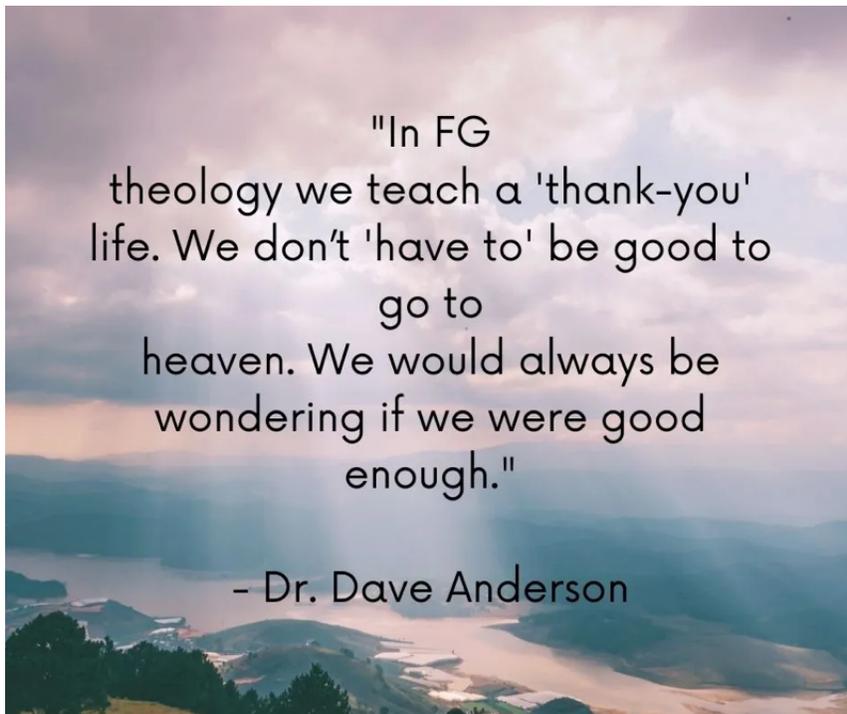
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teared up. I assumed I had offended her somehow, so I asked, "What is it? Something I said?" She replied, "No. I mean yes. I have never heard about this kind of love." I asked her about her church background. She said she came from California and had been a member of a famous pastor's church for fifteen years. "One day I went to church and the pastor said, 'If any of you have an ongoing sin you have wrestled with for many years, then you probably are not a Christian.'" At this point she was quite emotional and said, "I have wrestled with smoking most of my adult life. I think it is a sin because I am destroying my body, but I can't seem to quit. Because of what the pastor said, I have been living in fear that I will not go to heaven when I die."



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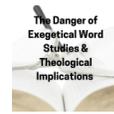
- Dr. Dave Anderson

minds me of a conversation I had with Tony Evans, a famous American preacher, while driving to the airport. He asked me, "Do you ever wrestle with pride?" My reply: "Only every day." He responded, "I have wrestled with pride all my life. Does that mean I am not a Christian?" Ongoing sin



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battles have caused many professing Christians to doubt their salvation. Tony was not doubting his salvation. He was pointing out the problem of anyone thinking he does not have ongoing sin in his life along with believing that ongoing sin is a sign he is not born-again.

The problem of assurance has mushroomed since MacArthur came out with his book on salvation. Not that he alone is the cause. Some of the most gifted and popular preachers in America (John Piper, Timothy Keller, the late R. C. Sproul, Matt Chandler, the late James M. Boice) teach that a person professing to be a Christian who “continues in sin” is not a Christian at all (1 Jn 3:9). Do you continue in sin? How are you doing with that pride problem?

FG theology explains the conundrum of being justified in heavenly places while simultaneously being a sinful person on earth (*simul iustus et peccator*—Martin Luther). FG theology makes a distinction between your inalterable Position *in Christ* and your still sinful Condition *on earth*. The first, our sinless Position in Christ, is established through our justification, while the second, our sinful Condition on earth, is changed for the better through our sanctification. But only FG theology can explain how these two (justification and sanctification) relate to one another in such a way that the gospel of God is not encumbered with requirements that extend beyond simple faith in Jesus. In this brief introduction to FG theology, we do not intend to tell you what we think is wrong with the many competing theologies out there; no, we want to tell you what is right

about FG theology. We want to highlight six aspects of FG theology that bring to the child of God greater assurance, greater intimacy, greater motivation, and greater understanding of God than any other system of theology, at least in our estimation.

FG theology allows us to live a “thank-you” life instead of a “have-to” life.

Larry Moyer of EvanTell Ministries is the first I had heard articulate this contrast. He was simply saying if eternal life is a free gift from God, then it should be obvious that we don't “have to be good” to go to heaven. As far as we can tell, all other theologies say we have to be good to get into the pearly gates. Roman Catholicism says we must continue to be good in order to have Christ's character formed in us to the extent we are acceptable to God and get a pass into heaven. That is their view of justification: ongoing infusions of Christ's character throughout our lives, starting with infant baptism, until we make the grade required to get into heaven. If we fall short, there is still the option of purgatory where the purification process (purging) continues until we pass muster. Bottom line: we have to be good in order to go to heaven.

But surely the Protestant Reformation changed all that . . . or did it? The twin towers of the Reformation were Martin Luther and John Calvin, both avid students of Augustine (d. 430 A.D.). Augustine said a professing Christian must persevere in faithful obedience to Christ until the end of his life or he will not be able to go to heaven. This became the

fifth point of Dortian Calvinism, called perseverance of the saints. Both Luther and Calvin perpetuated this doctrine. Hence, even to this day, all the denominations spun off from Calvin and Luther believe a Christian has to be good until the end of his life to have eternal life. Jacob Arminius himself was initially a Calvinist, but later generations with leading lights like John Wesley fostered a branch of Christianity known as the Arminians. They, like the Lutherans, taught that Christians must be good until the end of their lives or they lose their salvation. So, the Calvinists said we have to be good or we never were true Christians to begin with, and the Arminians said we have to be good or we lose our salvation in the end. In either case, they were teaching a “have-to” life.

Of course, the Calvinists object to being characterized as those who teach a “have-to” life because they claim the necessary good works of the believer are simply external proof of his genuine, internal faith. But this is just double-talk. If something is necessary, then it is a “have-to,” a “must,” a “requirement.” It puts the burden of being good on the shoulders of the professing Christian. Augustine helped mitigate this burden by claiming that God gave a second gift (the first being eternal life) to the professing Christian. That was the gift of perseverance, which God arbitrarily chose to give to some believers and not to others. When asked why God would choose some and not others, Augustine simply explained that it was a great mystery.^[1] Mystery or not, the followers of Augustine (Catholics, Calvinists, and Arminians) teach a “have-to be good” life until the end of one’s life or

heaven's gates are closed.

Of course, this kind of teaching will yield some wonderfully moral people. But what is missing in the lives of so many of them is joy. I spent a summer near Guadalajara, Mexico writing a book. My host was a retired British Petroleum executive from South Africa. He was an Afrikaner raised in the Dutch Reformed faith. He told me no one was allowed to smile while in the church building, especially during services. If one felt a smile coming on, he must retreat from the building and smile outside. Why? Because church is serious business; one's attitude and actions are the difference between heaven and hell. No joy. In fact, Michael Eaton, formerly a Reformed scholar whom we will mention later, wrote his PhD dissertation on why so many of his Reformed friends lacked joy, were legalistic, judgmental, and introspective.^[2]

In FG theology we teach a “thank-you” life. We don't “have to” be good to go to heaven. We would always be wondering if we were good enough. But if I volunteer to be good (Rom 12:1-2) because I want to and out of gratitude for what the Savior has done for me, there is joy. A “have-to” life is a job; a “thank-you” life is a joy.

^[1] Augustine, Aurelius, *The Works of Aurelius Augustine, Volume 15: The Anti-Pelagian Works*, ed. M. Dods (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1876). The Latin title is *De Domo Perseverantiae*, “On the Benefit of Perseverance.” 21.8.

^[2] Michael Eaton wrote a book for popular audiences based on his dissertation: *No Condemnation: A New Theology of Assurance* (Downers

Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995).

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Fred Chay, PhD

Managing Editor, Grace Theology Press

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