THE FREE GRACE ALLIANCE WITHIN

THE FREE GRACE MOVEMENT: IT IS WHAT IT IS!

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The Free Grace Alliance within the Free Grace Movement: It Is What It Is!

There are recurring myths, misinformation, and misconceptions about the Free Grace Movement (FGM) as well as the Free Grace Alliance's (FGA) origins, purpose, practice, and theology. Some of the misinformation comes from being uniformed, some from attacks both outside the Grace Movement and inside the Grace Movement. Why was the FGA started? Where does FGA fit in the FGM? Is the FGA too inclusive or too exclusive? What is the truth? Can you handle the truth? On this 10th Anniversary of the FGA, it would be helpful to clarify who we are and where we fit in the FGM, especially in light of recent and familiar criticisms.

First, we should define what is the Free Grace Movement. A "movement" is defined as a coordinated series of group actions to accomplish a goal or advance an issue. It would be difficult to establish that there ever was a coordinated group action to advance specifically the Free Grace (FG) message until recent history. However, there has always been a FG presence throughout history, and in recent history we can point to various groups who hold the FG view, yet may fall short of being described as a coordinated movement. They existed or exist for other reasons (evangelism, missions, education, church) while they held a FG perspective. When Grace Evangelical Society (GES) formed in 1986 under the leadership of Bob Wilkin, we had what could legitimately be called a FG *movement*. The FGA, formed in 2004, continues to represent the FG message as "a coordinated series of group actions to accomplish a goal or advance an issue."

Part One: Misunderstandings from Outside the Free Grace Movement

1. The Free Grace Movement is something recent in history.

It is true that FG is not the prevalent view today, but history would probably show that it never was. Even in Paul's day it had to be defended constantly and rigorously. Critics often appeal to the Reformers, but such an appeal falls flat, because if those critics really wanted to honor the Reformers, they would hold, as the Reformers did, to *Sola Scriptura*; not *Sola Scriptura with an Addendum of John Calvin*. Calvin was committed to Scripture before he was committed to his own system. His system came from his understanding of Scripture which has since been modified and "improved upon" by his Calvinistic heirs. If the Reformers were given the opportunity today, would they not continue to reform their doctrine as they grew in their knowledge of the Scriptures?

Critics who want to engage the FG message must engage at the level of Scripture, not theological tradition, commentary counting, or proof-texting that often goes along with their criticisms. We wait in vain for exegetical arguments, but what we get are the canards "This is a new interpretation without historical precedent," or "This message is antinomian and would promote license." Both of which are not true and usually not supported.

Everyone who has ever been saved has been saved by free grace. There is only one gospel, and grace means that it must be applied to us as a free gift "not by works" (Eph. 2:8-9). The discussion of the role of works has *always* accompanied the gospel issue in some form. Works have intruded from the beginning of the church (Romans 3- 4, 10. Galatians, Ephesians 2, Acts 15), and the counter to it was that we are justified freely by his grace. That argument is not recent but perpetual.

2. The Free Grace Movement is an irrelevant minority movement.

It may well be a minority movement. But isn't that always part and parcel of any movement? And if it is so irrelevant, why are some prominent theologians beginning to attack it or find it necessary to even say this? Doesn't this attest to the growing influence of the FG message?

Recently, a leading theologian has attacked the FGM and the FGA at conferences and on his web site, and will criticize the FG message in a workshop in November at the Evangelical Society's Annual Meeting in San Diego. When we (the FGA council) found out about this, we submitted a proposal that would counter and defend the FG view. We were turned down. The proposal was in my name as the presenter. I have presented several papers at the annual ETS meetings and have never had a proposal rejected before—until now. It leads me to believe that if the FG message is a minority movement, it is because the mainstream, largely controlled by Reformed Calvinists opposed to the FG message, is working to keep it that way. And frankly, they hold the academic and publishing reigns. But on the other hand, we should be encouraged that the FG message and the FGA have influenced enough people to elicit a response.

The FGA is working and giving us more gravity in academia, in churches, and on the mission field. As tough as it has been for some to work together, enough have so as to cause others to respond to us. So I am encouraged by the criticism, not discouraged.

3. The Free Grace Movement does not believe turning from sin is necessary for salvation.

Critics outside the FGM have charged that the FGM demands no turning from sins, repentance, or life change, which promotes license. In this, we should take heart, because that has always been the criticism for preaching grace (Rom. 6:1, 14). If we are not being criticized for preaching license, then we are not preaching the gospel of grace. But of course, we do not preach license. We preach that grace teaches and motivates us to live a godly life (Titus 2:12). These critics are usually unaware that there are various views of repentance within the FGM, though all views support the FG perspective. Still, everyone in the FGM is united in believing that every *believer* should turn from sins, be transformed in life, and reject licentiousness. However, those are not the conditions for salvation.

Furthermore, the FG message teaches that the Judgment Seat of Christ holds us accountable to live a changed life because every believer's life will be assessed for its good and its bad and there will be rewards or consequences accordingly. But the Bema judgment is neglected, totally ignored, or at best minimalized by these critics, and therefore so is the proper motivation for the believer's responsibility. If by "antinomian" the critics mean that we do not preach that we are under the Mosaic Old Testament Law, then we plead "guilty!" But that does not mean we do not recognize the Christian's responsibility to obey the Law of Christ, the Royal Law, and the other commands of Scripture. We do not however, make any law the determiner of our eternal salvation either at the front end or the back end.

4. The Free Grace Movement's gospel presentation is a form of decisionism, **intellectual assent only, and easy-believism**.

Some in the FGM take the view that response to the gospel is a decision, others do not. Most would agree that it is not *easy* to believe, but it is *simple* to believe. Some say it is only intellectual assent, some say it is that, but also involves the will. So these charges against the

FGM are uninformed. The nature of faith is a valid discussion within the FGM, but it has also been so outside the FGM, even in Reformed circles. Perhaps the problem comes from psychologizing the Scriptures beyond what is revealed. The Scriptures lead us to believe that faith allows for an intellectual approach, but at times the gospel seems to appeal to the will also. There are those who will come to salvation through the different emphases. We should not impose on the Scriptures our human construct of a psychological model.

Part Two: Misunderstandings from Within the Free Grace Movement

1. The Free Grace Alliance began as a split with Grace Evangelical Society over doctrine.

No. It began as a sincere effort to advance the grace message around the world. Everyone who helped found the FGA was a GES member. We have always recognized, affirmed, and valued the contribution of GES academically and theologically (while not endorsing all their beliefs). However, there was a large sentiment that more could be done missionally, and that an alliance of all FG ministries would be necessary for that.

I was an initiator of the founding of FGA, though it was not called that until later. It began as a discussion within GES, with Bob Wilkin and many other FG leaders present. Bob Wilkin, and Zane Hodges were the first informed of the idea for the FGA, the first invited to join, and their input was invited. I will not speak for them, but I can document that the initial reluctance to join was because of some doctrinal inferences in our Covenant that never developed into any significant discussion later. However, after the FGA formed, members of both FGA and GES (sometimes those who belonged to both) began to raise the issue of the content of the gospel and it developed into a heated discussion. It was clear there were many who felt they could not endorse the GES gospel, as well as some who felt they could not endorse the FGA gospel (see the attachment for a statement of the differences). So it became evident that the FGA and GES now provided each group a "home," though that was never an original motivation for the FGA (nor GES). Unfortunately, but perhaps inevitably, that controversy became associated with the reason for the founding of FGA, but it never was. This is a great misunderstanding that needs to be confronted. I repeat, the FGA was not a split of any kind with GES. Doctrinal differences only emerged later.

Today, I would say there is an understood agreement between those of FGA and GES to disagree on the issue of the content of the gospel or "saving message" (as GES prefers to call it). Both organizations do not however minimalize the importance of this issue. I know that both organizations have worked to restrain and control the ungracious people and language in this discussion and to maintain a gracious disposition.

2. The Free Grace Alliance welcomes those who believe the so-called "Crossless Gospel."

. . . or those who believe that deity is not essential to the gospel, or those who believe that acknowledgment of sin is not relevant in evangelism, or those who think believers can be under the wrath of God.

First, I do not think it is fair and accurate to call the view espoused by GES the "Crossless Gospel." It implies that they say the cross is irrelevant to the gospel and its saving message. It is similar in tone to those who accuse the FGM of "No -Lordship Salvation." Both terms are misleading, unfair, and unnecessarily derogatory. While GES does hold that the

cross and resurrection of Christ are essential to Christ's saving work, they do not believe that those facts are a necessary part of the saving message. In contrast, the FGA Covenant stands on its own. It says:

- *The sole means of receiving the free gift of eternal life is faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, whose substitutionary death on the cross fully satisfied the requirement for our justification.*
- *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.

I don't understand how anyone who holds to the GES gospel could agree to the FGA statement. The FGA statement makes it clear that a person must believe in the person of Christ as well as His provision and His promise. Yet, some have tried to float the criticism that the GES view is the majority view in the FGM and by implication, the FGA. I don't know how they could measure this, and I am pretty sure it isn't true of the FGM and definitely not true of the FGA.

Another unfair criticism has tried to paint the FGM and FGA as rife with people who do not think belief in the deity of Christ is necessary for salvation. I find no basis for such a rumor. The FGA statement does not articulate the deity of Christ, but we could argue that it assumes it (The statement says, "the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God"). However, we recognize that there is room for some discussion of how much of the deity of Christ must be explicitly understood.

Still another false accusation I have encountered is that the FGM and the FGA welcome people who do not think a sinner has to recognize his or her sin in order to be saved. I know that this is the position of Bob Wilkin of GES and perhaps some in the FGM, but I do not find it in any way a prevalent or popular idea. While there is no explicit statement demanding a person recognize his sinful condition in order to be saved, that is certainly implied by the language used in the FGA Covenant.

- *". . . whose substitutionary death on the cross fully satisfied the requirement for our justification."*
- *". . . has delivered us from condemnation and guaranteed our eternal life."*
- *Christ has delivered us from condemnation . . ."*

One more criticism I'll mention has to do with the interpretation of God's *wrath* and it implications for believers, if any. There is some discussion among FG adherents about whether believers can experience the wrath of God. Mostly the discussion centers on the significance of the present tense in "God is pouring out His wrath" in Romans 1:18 and its implications for believers, especially in Romans itself. As you can see, the argument goes according to how one defines *wrath* . Can it be temporal as well as eternal, or is a term used exclusively of one or the other? As is usually the case in interpretation, it is best to let the context define *wrath*. There are people within the FGM who have different views of God's wrath. It does not address the issue to simply assume one view over the other and then implicitly charge those who disagree with heresy. A different view of the meaning of *wrath* should not exclude anyone from the FGA or the FGM, especially when they base their view on biblical evidence.

3. The Free Grace Alliance includes those who believe in punitive damages at the Bema and kingdom exclusion.

To have a decent discussion on this, we would first have to define what is meant by "punitive damages." Everyone who is FG should admit that the Bema has consequences, and some of those are negative, like having unworthy works burned, or being denied Christ's confession before the Father. The controversy depends on what one defines as punitive, and also the extent of the negative consequence. While the FG position does not encourage any view of extreme punishment at the Bema, it has always, by its nature and theology, encouraged the importance of the Bema as a motivation to live a godly and responsible life. While some have misleadingly characterized the FGM and the FGA as welcoming or encouraging a view of extreme punishment, it is a minority view within the FGA and the Grace Movement itself. Many in the FGA and FG movement have argued against millennial exclusion and punitive suffering.

Though we do not all come out with the same interpretations, we recognize the freedom to deal honestly with the Scriptures that mention negative consequences at the Bema within a FG framework. There is room in the FGM and the FGA for a legitimate discussion of the negative consequences of the Bema from a biblical perspective.

4. The Free Grace Alliance welcomes those who do not hold traditional dispensational eschatology.

A strong argument can be made that the FG view is based on a traditional dispensational hermeneutic and its resulting eschatology. I would agree. But the reality is that there are a few people who do not hold a literal dispensationalist hermeneutic or eschatology, yet they affirm every statement in the FGA Covenant. How they get to that place in their thinking is something they would have to explain. Is it *possible* for such people to join the FGA? Yes. Is it *probable*? No. Furthermore, this number of people is infinitesimally small in the FGA and probably in the FGM. In fact, I can only think of one example. A few years ago, the FGA had Dr. Michael Eaton (British scholar now Kenyan, author, pastor) as a special guest speaker because we wanted him to talk about his doctoral work related to assurance of salvation in Galatians. Eaton is Reformed, amillennial, and even charismatic. But he has made a major academic contribution in the doctrine of assurance that has had an impact in the Reformed circles and impressed many FG readers through his book, *No Condemnation: A New Theology of Assurance*. To this day, he has been one of the most popular guest speakers FGA has ever had. However, a few criticized FGA for having him, even though he only spoke on Galatians and assurance as we asked. Now a few are using this example to mislead people into thinking that the FGA and the FGM "welcome" those who do not hold to traditional dispensationalism.

There are a few in the FGA and FGM who might hold to a form of Progressive Dispensationalism, but they do so defending the same literal hermeneutic held by traditional dispensationalists, with Christ sitting on a literal Davidic throne in a literal one thousand year kingdom on earth.

The bottom line is that the FGA Covenant does not "encourage" an amillennial, Reformed, or even charismatic from joining, but neither do we disallow such a person as long as they can affirm their agreement with the seven statements in the Covenant. So it is *possible*, but not *probable*, and to my knowledge, almost *nonexistent.* Dispensationalism is important,

but not the FGA's defining position. The FGA is what it is, an alliance formed around a gospel of free grace.

5. The Free Grace Alliance has compromised doctrinally for inclusion purposes.

The statements in the last paragraph would draw this kind of remark from those who want to see it. But the answer is the same: See the Covenant! *It is what it is.* The Covenant was drafted by Earl Radmacher, Elliot Johnson, Fred Lybrand, Phil Congdon, and Charlie Bing, then approved by the charter FGA membership. It may be true that we did not anticipate every theological issue or concern—no doctrinal statement ever does, but every FGA director and president has agreed with it and upheld it. We have discussed making it more exclusive, but have never seriously considered changing it in view of our mission.

What really seems to be the issue is the relationship FGA has with some who do not hold the majority views about dispensationalism, eschatology, and consequences at the Bema. There is an implied ethic of separation from those who hold different interpretations of Scripture from the majority. But the FGA is an alliance, an alliance built on a foundational Covenant statement of our core beliefs. An alliance cannot succeed if it separates from those who affirm that Covenant but differ on other less consequential issues. We recognize that there are some other very important issues, at which point some have felt free to determine what is an essential issue not covered by the Covenant. But is unscrupulous to call a different view on a non- essential doctrine "false doctrine" or "heresy" and then call for doctrinal separation. It is a convenient self-serving tactic, but I do not think it honors the Lord or the tenure of Scripture. After all, each of us has a different interpretation of some Scripture or doctrine, in which case, we are all "heretics."

The FGA's issue is the gospel of grace and graciousness--nothing more, nothing less. On this there is not nor ever has been any compromise.

6. The Free Grace Movement is not very gracious.

Sadly this charge is hard to rebut. FG Christians who have had honest disagreements have acted disagreeably. I have seen the worst of behavior on all sides of issues, and frankly it has dumbfounded me. I'm sure there are times when some thought I too added more heat than light, so I'm not claiming total innocence. But I repent of any ungracious words I have emitted, though I am not conscious of many. I do admit that I was naïve to think that Christians, FG Christians at that, could really make the gospel of grace "of first importance" (1 Cor. 15:3) and manage to agreeably disagree on other issues for the sake of advancing the FG message. At least we can say with Paul in Philippians 1:15-18:

> *15 Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. 16 The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. 17 The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition,, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. 18 What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.*

Conclusion

The purpose of the FGA is to build upon the FGM's (the Bible's) liberating message of God's amazing grace. Fulfilling our mission to *connect, encourage, and equip Christians*

to share the message of God's grace around the world is succeeding, though sometimes in spite of misinformation and misunderstandings.

FGA Covenant

As members of the Evangelical Tradition, we affirm the Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the inspired Word of God and is therefore inerrant in the autographs. Furthermore, God is a Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each an uncreated person, one in essence, equal in power and glory. As members of this tradition, we are concerned about the clear understanding, presentation, and advancement of the Gospel of God's Free Grace.

We affirm the following:

- The Grace of God in justification is an unconditional free gift.
- The sole means of receiving the free gift of eternal life is faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, whose substitutionary death on the cross fully satisfied the requirement for our justification.
- 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.
- Christ has delivered us from condemnation and guaranteed our eternal life.
- Justification is the act of God to declare us righteous when we believe in Jesus Christ alone.
- Assurance of justification is the birthright of every believer from the moment of faith in Jesus Christ, and is founded upon the testimony of God in His written Word.
- Spiritual growth, which is distinct from justification, is God's expectation for every believer; this growth, however, is not necessarily manifested uniformly in every believer.
- 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.

COVENANT:

In agreement with these affirmations, we covenant to work together graciously and enthusiastically to advance this Gospel of Grace, and to communicate with a positive and gracious tone toward all others, both inside and outside the Free Grace Alliance.

Epilogue

What is the Primary Difference Between the Saving Message[1] of GES and that of the FGA?

The question continues to arise, "What is the primary difference between the GES doctrinal position and that of the FGA?" This brief statement summarizes that key difference. It does not attempt to fully develop, defend, or critique either position. Although both organizations believe the difference is significant, the leadership of neither organization holds any animosity toward the other. Leaders from both organizations have read this statement andagree it captures the basic point of each position.[2]

***Areas of agreement*:** The two organizations share the vast majority of common evangelical beliefs. Related to salvation, they both agree that salvation (justification) is bygrace through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. Both agree that Jesus is theobject of saving faith. Both agree that the death, burial, and resurrection are historical events. Both agree in the theological necessity of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus as the basis of our salvation.

***Area of disagreement*:** The primary difference between the two organizations is how they define the saving message, that is, whether it *necessarily* includes the cross and the resurrection of Jesus.[3]

The GES Position: The sole requirement for receiving eternal life is belief in Jesus. To believe in Jesus is to be convinced that He guarantees everlasting life to all who simply believe in Him for it (John 4:14; 5:24; 6:47; 11:26; 1 Tim 1:16).[4] John, for example, does not say that one must believe in the finished work of Jesus to have eternal life. The "Him" in John 3:16 and related passages that one must believe in is the Jesus who gives eternal life. GES believes that "since the disciples were born again beforethey believed in Jesus' resurrection (cf. John 2:11; 3:16), and since John's Gospel was written after the resurrection to tell people how they could have eternal life (20:31), belief in Jesus' resurrection is not a condition of eternal life."[5] Thus, GES holds that His work on the cross is a theological necessity, that those presenting the saving message do include the cross and resurrection, but knowledge of and belief in the cross and resurrection *are not necessary* to receive eternal life, at least theoretically.

The FGA Position: The FGA believes the "Him" in John 3:16 and related passages is fully defined by the end of the book not only as the one who performed the signs John records but also as the one who died on the cross and was raised from the dead. In the progress of revelation, explicit belief in the death and resurrection was not a requirement prior to those events which occurred before the cross (i.e., in John 1---18) because the individual would not comprehend the requirement, just as the disciples did not comprehend (John 20:3---9). By the time John wrote John 20:31, belief in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God, included His saving work. The content of the saving message after the cross includes the death and resurrection of Jesus (1 Cor. 1:17, 18, 15:3---8, that content here marked out by the words "according to the Scriptures"). The FGA holds that knowledge of and belief in the cross and resurrection*are necessary* to receive eternal life (*in* Jesus *who* died and was raised).[6]

***Conclusion*:** Both organizations wish to keep the saving message clear and correct. They differ, however, in what one *must* know about the Jesus who promises eternal life.

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[1] Some see the “gospel message” and the “saving message” as different messages. Thus, the phrase “saving message” (what one must believe to receive eternal life)is used here instead of “gospel” for clarity.

[2] Personal communication, Dr. Bob Wilkin to Dr. Roger Fankhauser, Feb. 19, 2013.

[3] Some would include the necessity of believing in the deity of Christ as another key difference. GES does not believe it is necessary; some within the FGA do believe it is necessary. Howeverdifferent views do exist within the FGA. The FGA covenant says a person receives eternal life byfaith in the *Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God*; the GES belief statement says by faith alone in the *Lord Jesus Christ* (emphasis added).

[4] http://www.faithalone.org/about/beliefs.html

[5] Robert N. Wilkin, "The Gospel According to John", in *The Grace New Testament Commentary*, ed. Robert N. Wilkin (Denton, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2010), 372.

[6] http://www.freegracealliance.com/covenant.htm