

Grace Baiting: Twenty Ways Lordship Faith Advocates Mischaracterize Free Grace Theology

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Introduction

Recently, I was reintroduced to John MacArthur's *The Gospel According to Jesus* in its updated version released in 2008 by Billy Graham Evangelistic Association.ⁱ Franklin Graham wrote the introductory tribute to the book and to its author. For years I have considered MacArthur to be the modern-day *granddaddy* of the Lordship Faith (a.k.a. Lordship Salvation) movement. I think that few would disagree that he is the most well-known spokesman and ardent advocate for Lordship Faith teaching on the evangelical scene today.

As I read the introduction and the first few chapters of the book, I was reminded afresh of the way that Lordship Faith writers and bloggers frequently belittle and satirize all who refuse to hold to their stringent theological views. A waft of arrogance often accompanies their words. I have witnessed just a bit of such mean-spiritedness from the Free Grace camp, but it seems to come wholesale from the Lordship Faith side. Perhaps the movement takes its lead from MacArthur, who certainly shows no restraint in disparaging his opposition (more on this later).

Although there is no blue-print employed by Lordship Faith writers to trivialize or caricaturize opposing viewpoints, I have noticed the use of the following tactical tools. This list may be thought of or entitled as:

“A Lordship Faith Guide for Denouncing Free Grace Theology” (Rejoinders to these allegations will follow the points being made. Bible quotations are taken from the New International Version).ⁱⁱ

1. Stress that the modern evangelical movement has gone astray and that there is a great need today for change in Evangelical Christian theology. Imply that the driving force of the movement is heretical, but rarely label individuals as “heretics.” This reminds me of how Obama campaigned on America’s need for fundamental change: “America needs change” he would chant over and over. Our country is certainly getting change now, for better or worse. Regarding the alleged impact of Free-Grace theology on the Evangelical community, listen to the deprecating words of John MacArthur: “The now-pervasive influence of the no-lordship [read that Free-Grace] doctrine among evangelicals reflects the shallowness and spiritual poverty of the contemporary evangelical movement. It is also doubtless one of the main causes for evangelicalism’s impoverishment. You cannot remove the lordship of Christ from the gospel message without undermining faith at its core. That is precisely what is happening in the church today.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Comment: How’s that for MacArthur’s throwing down the gauntlet?

2. Extend the range of the opposing camp. Be sure to link them with other evangelical groups, such as the self-esteem movement, whose famous leaders never mention

anything negative, like hell, Satan or sin. Response: broadening the target makes it much easier for the mud slung to stick.

3. Declare that the core theology of the contraposition is false and therefore damning to those who hold exclusively to its precepts. Again, listen to MacArthur: “The church in our generation has reduced all of saving faith and Christian discipleship to a thoughtless (but more politically correct) cliché: ‘a personal relationship with Jesus.’ The ambiguity of the phrase reflects the destructive vagueness with which evangelicals have been handling (and mishandling) the gospel for the past several decades. As if Christ could be someone’s intimate friend *without* being that person’s Lord. That is, after all the whole gist of the no-lordship message: you can have Jesus as Savior and Friend here and now and decide later whether you really want to submit to His authority or not. It is hard to imagine a more disastrous twisting of what it means to be a Christian.”^{iv} Response: MacArthur misrepresents the Free Grace position (see ensuing categories for answers to his indictments).
4. Employ the antinomian allegation. Accuse your opponents of advocating lawlessness in the Christian community. Charge them as the ones who regularly condone or promote sinful behavior. Response: This is a silly and specious argument—of course neither side would truly espouse or excuse such behavior!
5. Routinely label your opponents as “no lordship”: Response: This is a totally inaccurate representation, a slam implying that Free Grace adherents believe that Jesus Christ is accepted as Savior but not as God! It reminds me of how abortion-rights advocates mislabel pro-lifers as “anti-choice.” A tit-for-tat retort would be to call them “anti-life!” Charlie Bing answers the “no lordship” accusation well: “It is only because Jesus is in the position of Lord God that He can save us and gives us eternal life. While Lord speaks of His position of deity, the name Jesus speaks of His humanity and role of Savior, because Jesus means Savior. In the name Jesus Christ, Christ means Messiah, the One anointed or chosen by God to be the Savior and King. So Lord is a title that primarily conveys Jesus’ deity. What this means for salvation is that Jesus has the power and authority to save sinners because He is God. What this does not mean is that sinners can only be saved if they submit to Him as the Ruler of their lives.”^v
6. Identify the opposition’s plan of salvation as, “Easy-believism” (MacArthur calls it “insidious easy-believism that makes no moral demands on the lives of sinners).^{vi} Other slurs may be used, such as “Sloppy Agape” or “Greasy Grace.” Response: Simple, straightforward, uncomplicated? Yes! Read Acts 16:30-31 and John 3:16. Easy? Ryrie answers: “The *object* of our faith involves unbelievable demands. He is Someone unseen; He lived in the distant past; the contemporary records about Him were preserved by his friends; and there are no living eyewitnesses today who could verify the truth of His claims. Is it easy to believe in someone like that? . . . The content of our faith involves unbelievable demands. We are asking people to trust this unseen Person about forgiveness of sins and eternal life on the basis of the death of that Person which is said to be substitutionary. Is that easy?”^{vii}
7. Classify the Free Grace gospel as a gospel of “Cheap grace” (taken from Bonhoeffer’s *The Cost of Discipleship*). Response: I find the implications of this term to be the most incendiary and offensive of all. There is nothing *cheap* about God’s grace—it cost God his only Son sent to die on the cross for the sins of

mankind. From our perspective, though, it is not cheap, it is an absolutely free gift (Eph. 2:8-9)!

8. Accuse the other side of embracing “saved unbelievers”: Indict them for allowing a person to completely reject Christ and his salvation while affirming that such an individual is still going to heaven, based upon his, “saying a prayer,” “walking an aisle,” “raising a hand” or “coming forward.” Response: once again, this is a caricature and a smear; the term “saved unbelievers” is an oxymoron. The Bible says nothing about such actions mentioned above as being salvific; it says, “Believe on the Lord Jesus and you will be saved”—Acts 16:31. And John 10:28-30 affirms the *keeping* of true believers by the power of the Father and the Son! This guardianship is the work of God called *preservation*. We are not kept saved by our own perseverance. It is the work of God, not of man (see Thomas Cucuzza’s book on the subject).^{viii}
9. MacArthur takes the lead in utilizing a potent diatribe of derogatory epithets: “The cheap grace and easy faith of a distorted gospel are ruining the purity of the church. The softening of the New Testament message has brought with it a putrefying inclusivism that in effect sees almost any kind of positive response to Jesus as tantamount to saving faith. Christians today are likely to accept anything other than utter rejection as authentic faith in Christ.”^{ix} Observation: I counted seven false slanderous attacks on the Free-Grace position in this brief passage alone! This quotation alone should provide ample evidence as to which side is the primary aggressor in the Lordship debate. Let’s answer the points above in order: “Cheap grace and easy faith”: See numbers 6 and 7 above. “A distorted gospel”: Distorted, really? Let me see, the Free Grace gospel affirms Paul’s delineation of the gospel of the death, burial and resurrection of Christ in 1 Corinthians 15:1-8. It also confirms that salvation comes by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone (Ephesians 2:8-9). Furthermore, Free Grace concurs with the clear-cut salvation message of Acts 16:30-31 as well as the writings of John who says repeatedly that salvation comes through believing in Jesus Christ alone (1 John 5:1-13; John 3:16-18; 5:24; 6:29, 35, 40, 47; 7:38; 11:25-26; 20:31). There’s no hint of a distorted gospel in any of these references! “Ruining the purity of the church”: Declaring the simple straightforward gospel message of faith alone in Christ alone is to *maintain* the purity of the church and its gospel. The fundamental unambiguous salvation message is laid out clearly in the verses cited above. To add any supplemental preconditions to the basic plan of salvation, such as a required promise of lifetime commitment followed by the obedient living out of such a promise, is to taint the gospel. “The softening of the New Testament message”: Free Grace theology does not soften the gospel message of the New Testament. It declares this message concisely, clearly and boldly as cited from the verses above. It does, however, establish a clear delineation between justification (salvation) and sanctification (discipleship, the process of maturing spiritually). To confuse these two distinct yet related categories is to bring about a muddying of the gospel while also placing unreasonable expectations on a person coming to faith in Christ. “A putrefying inclusivism”: Setting the derogatory adjective aside, if inclusivism means any and all who will come to Christ Jesus believing in him by faith, then I say a resounding *Amen!* Peter declares, “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as

some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). “Likely to accept anything other than utter rejection as authentic faith in Christ”: This statement is a gross (and untrue) exaggeration.

10. When citing Scripture, choose particular passages which put down the opposition while lending credence to your position. Camp heavily upon James 2 and “discipleship” sections of the Synoptic Gospels. Response: James 2 addresses believers; its focus is not on obtaining salvation; rather, it deals with the quality of a man’s faith, not the reality of his faith.^x The Gospel discipleship passages refer to *sanctification*, a post-conversion process of obedience and spiritual growth. They are not prerequisites for salvation.
11. Utilize obvious argumentation to strengthen your case in response to your opponents; use phrases such as, “No sane person would ever . . .,” “Everyone believes . . .,” “Only heretics and fools refuse to believe . . .” Response: none needed.
12. Equate terms such as “follower” and “disciple” with “believer.” Response: One of the core problems with Lordship Faith teaching is that it confuses or melds together justification and sanctification creating a jumbled mess, adding to and clouding the gospel message of salvation by faith in Christ alone.
13. When necessary, use well-disguised straw-man arguments. Response (by Charles Ryrie): “According to the dictionary, a straw man is ‘a weak or imaginary opposition (as an argument or adversary) set up only to be easily confuted.’ . . . these are spurious arguments often raised by proponents of a lordship salvation. Such arguments against those straw men seem more devastating. Realize that a straw man usually is not a total fabrication; it usually contains some truth, but truth that is exaggerated or distorted or incomplete. The truth element in a straw man makes it more difficult to argue against, while the distortion or incompleteness makes it easier to huff and puff and blow the man down.”^{xi}
14. Restate the opposing camp’s declared position on salvation. Accuse them of teaching that salvation comes merely by intellectual assent to an insipid set of facts or propositions. State that they believe in “facts about Christ,” but that they don’t believe “in Christ.” Use the phrase “the demons believe and tremble” to support this accusation. Response: once again, this is a distortion of the Free Grace position on salvation. James 2:19 states that the demons only believe that there is one God. They have no ability to believe in Christ in the sense of salvation. Of course Free Grace teaches believing in (being totally convinced of and embracing) the person and work of Christ—his death on the cross for our sins, his burial, his resurrection and his post-resurrection appearances (1 Cor. 15:1-8)—NOT in some set of lifeless historical data *about* Christ!
15. Emphasize the need to prove one’s salvation through Christian performance. Call it, “surrender and serve.” Accuse the opposition of having limited or no standards at all pertaining to salvation. Set the standards very high. Insist on a new convert’s promise to follow the lofty standards. Warn that lack of following through on their promise of commitment could likely be a sign of never having really been saved to begin with. Answer: the Free Grace position certainly has a place for committed Christian service to God; in fact, it most heartily encourages such involvement! The

question is not, “Should Christians serve the Lord?” Both sides answer that in the affirmative. Rather, the proper question is, “Does Christian service (good works for God) have anything to do with obtaining or *maintaining* salvation?” For the Free Gracer the answer is a resounding “No!” However, good works of service to the Lord are considered important, proper, and pleasing to God—the motivation being love for God and future rewards, *not* a fear of not having done enough.

16. Narrow the road of salvation to an elite limited few (the strongly committed ones). Francis Chan, for example, in his book *Crazy Love* creates his own artificial list of what he calls “the lukewarm.”^{xii} If read carefully his list includes all but the most dedicated of Christians. In the ensuing chapter five, Chan sanctimoniously discards his entire list of the lukewarm. Listen to his startling words of condemnation: “As I see it, a lukewarm Christian is an oxymoron; there’s no such thing. To put it plainly, churchgoers who are ‘lukewarm’ are not Christians. We will not see them in heaven.”^{xiii} Response: in reality, taken to its logical conclusion, Chan’s denunciation covers not only Free Grace Christians but *all* Christians because none is without sin and no one ever truly reaches or maintains such lofty peaks of potential Christian achievement.
17. If your arguments for Lordship Faith doctrine are refuted by the opposition, deflect the discussion away from the evidence. Accuse the other side of being unbiblical or of creating division in the Christian body. The following are effective lines to use against your opponent: “You need to consider the totality of Scripture!” “You are creating a tempest in a teapot.” “You’re simply jousting with the wind.” “Why do you constantly promote ungodly lifestyles?” “Why do Christians always circle the wagons and shoot inward at each other?” “Aren’t we basically on the same team anyway?” Answer: the Lordship Faith vs. Free Grace debate is not merely some “sandlot” dispute between children, as I saw one writer put it. The question of the true meaning of what it means to be saved is the most important question of all! Get that question wrong and you face the potential for a lifetime of legalistic bondage, a decimation of assurance of salvation, and, for some, ultimately, eternal separation from God.
18. Make the charge that Free Grace theology is merely a relatively recent phenomenon, an outgrowth of the seventies church-growth movement. Label its theology with one or more of the following terms to reflect such a connection: “seeker sensitive,” “seeker-friendly,” “Christianity light,” “gospel light” or “a watered-down gospel.” Answer: Free Grace theology predates the 1970s by over nineteen hundred years and has nothing to do with the seeker-sensitive movement whatsoever.
19. Accuse the opposition of misquoting or misapprehending the thrust of Lordship Faith’s teachings. The following blog quotation by someone named “Doug” is pretty typical of such an approach (note: a response given by the site’s founder is included): “I think a lot of people misunderstand people like MacArthur, Piper, etc. They teach that we are saved by grace alone. The evidence of our salvation is our fruit. If we claim to be saved and there is no fruit in our lives, then we need to examine ourselves to see if we are truly saved. That is what MacArthur and Piper truly teach, which is biblical.”^{xiv} Response by “Expreacherman”: “Doug, thanks for your comment. We do not misunderstand, we see exactly what MacArthur writes

and says. See my Blog at:

<http://expreacher.wordpress.com/2008/09/06/john-macarthur-lordship-salvation/>
MacArthur's Lordship salvation is not Biblical. To be sure of our salvation we need not look at our fruit—we believe in Christ and then look at the verse, I John 5:13. Our proof of our salvation is in Scripture not in our behavior or our fruit. In Christ eternally, ExP (Jack)."^{xv}

20. Finally, affirm Lordship Faith against your counterpart by reciting the famous quotation, "Unless the Lord Jesus is Lord of all He is not Lord at all." Response: I have heard or read this phrase repeated regularly by those who assume that it lends strong confirmation to their position. Likely, most don't even know the source or the context of this quotation. It was given by J. Hudson Taylor, iconic missionary of the late nineteenth century to China. The phrase was not given in the context of salvation. It had nothing to do with a Lordship Faith/ commitment or surrender salvation approach. The quotation concerned the Lordship of Christ in the sense of his being Lord God of the universe—of his complete ownership, Godship, or as Taylor put it, "propriatorship" [of creation]^{xvi} (see section 5 above).

Conclusion

My purpose in writing this paper was to expose and respond to the unfair and unkind misrepresentations by Lordship Faith proponents of Free Grace theology. It seems that for many in the Lordship camp it is not sufficient to state the best case that they can muster for their own theological position, supported by Scripture and logic. Instead, they feel the need to disparage and misstate Free Grace teachings while attempting to make the case for their own position seem stronger. Is the Free Grace side guilty of similar behavior? Sure, there are fringe people on the internet identifying themselves as Free Grace who label leading Lordship Faith teachers as "heretics". However, the name calling and caricaturizing seems, from my observation, to come primarily from the Lordship camp. It would be great if the insults would cease and that sound well-reasoned Scriptural exegesis could become the guiding standard for dialog between the two theological camps.

End

ⁱ John MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus: What is Authentic Faith?*, (Grand Rapids: Billy Graham Evangelistic Association with permission from Zondervan, 2008).

ⁱⁱ The Holy Bible, New International Version, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society).

ⁱⁱⁱ John MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, 25 [emphasis added].

^{iv} *Ibid.*, 30.

^v <http://www.gracelife.org/resources/gracenotes.asp?id=41>

^{vi} John MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, 20.

^{vii} Charles C. Ryrie, *Balancing the Christian Life*, (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1969, 1994), 188-89.

^{viii} For a complete expansion on the theme of perseverance vs. preservation, see: Thomas M. Cucuzza, *Secure Forever! God's Promise or Our Perseverance?*, (St. Cloud, MN, Thomas M. Cucuzza, Xulon Press, 2007).

^{ix} John MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, 51.

^x For a detailed analysis of James 2:14-26, see: Fred R. Lybrand, *Back to Faith: Reclaiming Gospel Clarity in an Age of Incongruence*, (Copyright Fred R. Lybrand, Xulon Press, 2009), Chapter 4.

^{xi} Charles C. Ryrie, *So Great Salvation: What it Means to Believe in Jesus Christ*, (Chicago: Moody Press/ SP Publications, 1989, 1997), 27.

^{xii} Francis Chan with Danae Yankowski, *Crazy Love: Overwhelmed by a Relentless God* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2008), 68-77.

^{xiii} *Ibid.*, 84 (for a complete review of *Crazy Love*, see:

<http://www.freegracealliance.com/article/balanced-love-a-review-of-the-book-crazy-love-by-francis-chan/>

^{xiv} <http://expreacherman.wordpress.com/2009/02/24/macarthur-type-new-apostacy/>

^{xv} *Ibid.*

^{xvi} J. Hudson Taylor, *Days of Blessing in Inland China, Second Edition* (London: Morgan and Scott, 1887), 28.