

The Gospel Wars; or the Debate over Lordship Salvation; or *Dallas Against the World*

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INTRODUCTION:

“The Gospel is not a call to repentance, or to amendment of our ways, to make restitution for past sins, or to promise to do better in the future. These things are proper in their place, but they do not constitute the Gospel; for the Gospel is not good advice to be obeyed, it is good news to be believed. Do not make the mistake then of thinking that the Gospel is a call to duty or a call to reformation, a call to better your condition, to behave yourself in a more perfect way than you have been doing in the past . . .

Nor is the Gospel a demand that you give up the world, that you give up your sins, that you break off bad habits, and try to cultivate good ones. You may do all these things, and yet never believe the Gospel and consequently never be saved at all.”

SOURCE: Dr. Harry A. Ironside, from the sermon: What Is The Gospel? http://www.jesus-is-savior.com/BTP/Dr_Harry_Ironside/what_is_the_gospel.htm. Accessed 10/05/2011. H. A. Ironside, (1876-1951), pastored Moody Church (1929-1948), background Plymouth Brethren and Salvation Army.

Today I wish to consider an important and much contested debate within recent evangelicalism.

Arguably, it goes to the very heart of the nature of evangelicalism itself. I have entitled to conflict *the Gospel Wars*. I have entitled thus for the nature of the Gospel itself is at the heart of the recent debate, now somewhat diminished, but still very much alive. There are a couple of reasons for bringing this topic up today. First, when we were to have Larry Pettegrew with us, he was to do the doctrine of sanctification and this controversy goes to the heart of that issue. More importantly and to our purpose here today, this controversy is part and parcel of our own movement, if movement it may be called. We have one brother whose website, “In Defense of the Gospel,” does *battle royal* for or against many things, not the least of which is “lordship salvation,” something he vehemently opposes! The two sides of the debate generally go by the terms *free grace* and *lordship* among friends but pejoratively are often denoted as *antinomians* and *legalists*.

Today I want to lay out the discussion offering a bit of a historical survey on the debate. While its contemporary form is scarcely twenty-five years old, its theological antecedents go back as far, at least, as the Reformation and further. For our purpose, we will just consider the discussion from the Reformation forward. The fundamental question that lies at the bottom of the recent discussion is whether or not conversion and discipleship are one and the same thing. Does an individual become a disciple when he/she becomes a Christian or is discipleship a secondary commitment one makes subsequent to salvation? The notion of accepting Christ *as Lord* is at the heart of the discipleship question. *Free grace* men suggest that one can simply believe in Jesus without accepting him as *Lord*. To be sure, accepting him as Lord should follow, but it follows salvation and is not a part of it.

Charles Bing states the seriousness of this discussion and the reason that it will likely not go away anytime soon.

The chief theological concern of the Lordship movement is preservation of what it considers the true gospel.... [T]his necessarily involves other theological issues such as the meaning and nature of faith, repentance, Christ's lordship, discipleship, justification, sanctification, security, perseverance, and assurance. (*Lordship Salvation*, 11)

James M. Boice summarizes the so-called *lordship* view. "Discipleship is not a supposed second step in Christianity, as if one first becomes a believer in Jesus and then, if he chooses, a disciple. From the beginning, discipleship is involved in what it means to be a Christian." (*Christ's Call to Discipleship*, 16).

LORDSHIP OPPONENTS – WHO ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?

- Lewis Sperry Chafer – *He That Is Spiritual* (1918)
- Everett F. Harrison, Ph.D. Princeton; Th.D. Dallas 1938
- Charles C. Ryrie (b. 1925), Th.M. 1947, Th.D. 1949; taught at Dallas 1962-1983 as head of the doctoral program – *So Great Salvation*
- Zane C. Hodges, Th.M. 1958; Th.D. NT Greek and Exegesis, 1960-1987 *Absolutely Free!*
- Ernest Pickering, Th. D. Dallas – *Lordship Salvation* (pamphlet published by Central Seminary Press)
- Joseph C. Dillow, Th. D. Dallas – *The Reign of the Servant Kings*
- Manfred Kober, Th. D. Dallas (articles in *Faith Pulpit*)
- Bob Wilkins, Ph. D. Dallas started Grace Evangelical Society in 1986 over which he remains as head. See them at www.faithalone.org.
- Charles Bing, Th. D. Dallas – *Lordship Salvation*
- Earl Radmacher, Th.M. Th.D. Dallas
- Other Dallas men – Robert Lightner, Thomas Lewellen, Livingston Bauvelt, Arthur Farstad, Roy Zuck, plus some Dallas men in our movement
- Lou Martuneac, M. A. Pensacola – *In Defense of the Gospel*
- Curtis Hutson, pamphlet *Lordship Salvation*

Organizations: Grace Evangelical Society (1986); Free Grace Alliance (2004)

LORDSHIP ADVOCATES

- B. B. Warfield
- A. W. Tozer, never graduated from high school (Alliance)
- John MacArthur, M. Div Talbot (IFCA) – *The Gospel According to Jesus, Faith Works*
- James Montgomery Boice, Th. D. Basel (Presbyterian)
- Kenneth Gentry, Th. D. Whitefield Theological Seminary (Presbyterian)
- Thomas J. Nettles, Ph. D. Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary (Baptist)
- Walter Chantry, B. D. Westminster Theological Seminary (Baptist) *Today's Gospel: Authentic or Synthetic?*
- Ernest Reisinger (1919-2004)

- Michael Horton, B.A. BIOLA, M.A. Westminster, Ph.D. Oxford – *Christ is Lord*
- Homer A. Kent, Jr., B.A. BJU, M.Div., Th.M., Th.D. Grace Theological Seminary
- John R. W. Stott, M. A. equivalent from Ridley Hall Theological College (Anglican)
- John Piper, B. D. Fuller; Ph. D. in NT from U of Munich (Baptist)
- Rolland McCune, Th.D. Grace
- William Combs¹, Th.D. Grace

Organizations: CURE

EARLY DEBATE

- B. B. Warfield and Lewis Sperry Chafer
 - Introducing the *carnal Christian* (Chafer, 1918, 11-12) “Though saved, the carnal Christians are walking ‘according to the course of this world.’ . . . the ‘carnal’ Christian is also characterized by a ‘walk’ that is on the same plane as that of the ‘natural’ man.”
 - “A Christian is a Christian because he is rightly related to Christ; *but ‘he that is spiritual’ is spiritual because he is rightly related to the Spirit, in addition to his relation to Christ in salvation*” (Chafer, 1918, 15. Emphasis added).
 - Warfield (1919) “Mr. Chafer opens his book with an exposition of the closing verses of the second and the opening verses of the third chapters of I Corinthians. Here he finds three classes of men contrasted, the ‘natural’ or unregenerated man, and the ‘carnal’ and ‘spiritual’ men, both of whom are regenerated, but the latter of whom lives on a higher plane. ‘There are two great spiritual changes which are possible to human experience,’ he writes (p. 8), ‘the change from the “natural” man to the saved man, and the change from the “carnal” man to the “spiritual” man. The former is divinely accomplished when there is a real faith in Christ; the latter is accomplished when there is a real adjustment to the Spirit. The “spiritual” man is the divine ideal in life and ministry, in power with God and man, in unbroken fellowship and blessing.’ This teaching is indistinguishable from what is ordinarily understood by the doctrine of a ‘second blessing,’ ‘a second work of grace,’ ‘the higher life.’”
- 1959 between Everett Harrison and John Stott in *Eternity*
- John MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus* vs. Zane Hodge, *Absolutely Free!* and Charles R. Ryrie, *So Great Salvation*

¹Bill Combs is among those who refer to the non-lordship view as the “Dallas Seminary Theology.” See William W. Combs, “The Disjunction between Justification and Sanctification in Contemporary Evangelical Theology,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 6 (Fall 2001): 17-44, esp. pp. 28-33 for additional writers who are Dallas grads. It should be noted that this view is no longer indicative of Dallas, nor is it true that all Dallas graduates hold this view in solidarity. Our own Jon Pratt, a Dallas Ph.D., does not follow a non-lordship view.

HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS

- The Sandemanian controversy – early 18th century in England and the US. John Glas and Robert Sandeman. Faith is mental assent.²
 - John Glas (1695-1773)
 - Minister of Church of Scotland work in Tealing
 - “bare belief in the bare truth” what Michael Haykin calls “the intellectualist view of faith.”³
 - Robert Sandeman (1718-1771) – son-in-law to Glas, married Catherine *Letters on Theron and Aspario addressed to the Author* (1757) (James Hervey, 1755). In 1763, Sandeman emigrated to New England and spread his views there
 - Welsh Baptist Christmas Evans captivated by Sandemanianism for a time in the 1790s abiding in “the cold and sterile regions of spiritual frost,” with “a cold heart towards Christ, and his sacrifice, and the work of his Spirit.”
 - In 1767, Isaac Backus answered this error with *True Faith Will Produce Good Works*⁴
 - Andrew Fuller responded to Sandemanianism in *Strictures on Sandemanianism* (1810) “The foundation of whatever is distinguishing in the system seems to relate to the nature of justifying faith. This Mr. S. constantly represents as the bare belief of the bare truth; by which definition he intends, as it would seem, to exclude from it every thing pertaining to the will and the affections, except as effects produced by it.”⁵
- The antinomian Controversy in New England Puritanism – Anne Hutcheson and John Cotton
- The Reformers and the Catholics – Geneva vs. the Council of Trent

KEY THEOLOGICAL ISSUES AT STAKE

- The doctrine of faith – its nature and implications. Is saving faith mental assent or does it include the volitional act of turning from sin?
- The doctrine of repentance – its nature and relationship between faith and repentance. Does repentance precede or follow faith?
- The doctrine of lordship/discipleship – does one surrender to Christ as a part of conversion?

²On Sandemanianism, see John Howard Smith, *The Perfect Rule of the Christian Religion* (Albany, NY: SUNY, 2008).

³Michael Haykin, “Sandemanianism,” accessed October 10, 2011 at http://www.the-highway.com/sandeman_Haykin.html

⁴*True faith will produce good works: A discourse, wherein are opened the nature of faith, and its powerful influence on the heart and life; together with the contrary nature and effects of unbelief: and answers to various objections. To which are perfix'd [sic] a brief view of the present state of the Protestant world, with some remarks on the writings of Mr. Sandeman.* By Isaac Backus. Minister of the Gospel in Middleborough.

⁵Andrew G. Fuller, *The Complete Works of Andrew Fuller* Volume 2: Controversial Publications J. Belcher, ed. (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1988), 566. (Logos edition.)

- The doctrine of sanctification – are works of righteousness the necessary evidence of conversion? Can one be a *carnal* Christian – that a genuine believer who is so sinful that he has no evidence of spiritual life.
- The doctrine of eternal security/perseverance – Can a true believer apostatize?

THREE BASIC POSITIONS (HORTON)

- Hodge and *free grace*; Ryrie is a modified form
- MacArthur and *lordship*
- Both wrong at some level – Hodges and Ryrie are wrong because they are *antinomian* while MacArthur is wrong in the way he confuses faith and obedience.⁶

UNDERSTANDING THE DEBATE

It should be noted at the outset that first and foremost, this is a debate essentially between Calvinism and Arminianism. Many of the issues at stake have been argued against in Arminian circles and the anti-lordship position is another way to attack Calvinism without assailing it head-on. For instance, Bing argues “Why does God command men to repent if He himself is responsible for bestowing it?” (p. 84). This is simply the question of free will vs. a will under bondage which Calvinists/Arminians have debated for several hundred years!

In one sense this is a debate *within* dispensationalism. While much of the literature comes from Covenant/Calvinist men, the primary combatants—MacArthur and Hodges/Ryrie are all *classic* dispensationalists⁷

There is a lot of strong rhetoric to wade through. Both sides accuse the other of heterodoxy. Robert Strimple calls non-lordship people “false teachers” (ch. 1 in Horton, p. 61) and calls the view heresy (p. 65). James M. Boice says that this view is “the greatest weakness in of contemporary evangelical Christianity in America” (In “Introduction” to *The Gospel of Jesus*)

Both sides accuse each other of simply misunderstanding the text of Scripture – Zane Hodges: “Contemporary attacks on the complete freeness of the Gospel of God’s grace likewise appeal to Scripture. But invariably the appeal rests on a misconstruction of the passages in questions. This is usually accompanied by the failure to face to plain meaning of the most direct statements about the way of salvation. The confusion is enormous. The consequences are calamitous.” (*Gospel Under Siege*, 7)

⁶It should be noted that when the book was being written, Horton and his colleagues were in communication with MacArthur and MacArthur had agreed to moderate some of his comments to bring them more into line with his Reformation sensibilities. However, one of Horton chief critiques is in effect, “if MacArthur would jettison his dispensationalism, that would relieve a lot of the confusion!”

⁷Admittedly it may be a bit difficult these days to define exactly what classic dispensationalism. For example, does classic dispensationalism include aspects of Keswick theology?

Both sides accuse each other of excessive rhetoric. Cf. Robert Lightner's review of Horton who charges Horton with anger while Danny Akin's review of Zane Hodges considers Hodges "arrogant and condescending."

BLAMING THE REFORMERS/CLAIMING THE REFORMERS

Dillow, p. 8 Calvin argued "that the gospel of free grace will not lead to license but will, to the contrary, result in a life of holiness. However, in order to make his argument 'air tight,' Calvin went beyond the Scripture and taught that the gospel will necessarily and inevitably guarantee a life of holiness."

Against Arminianism and Calvinism, Dillow argues for the "Partaker" view of eternal security/perseverance. (pp. 21ff) It is summarized in seven premises

1. Those who have been born again will always give some evidence of growth in grace and spiritual interest and commitment. A man who claims he is a Christian and yet never manifests any change at all has no reason to believe he is justified.
2. The assurance of salvation is found only by looking outward to Christ and not by looking inward to the evidences of regeneration in the life. . . .
3. It is possible for true Christians to fail to persevere in faith and, in remote cases, even to deny the faith altogether (Heb. 10:26, 35). While initial growth is taught in the NT, it is possible for a true Christian to lapse into carnality and finish his course walking as a mere man. . . .
4. The warning passages of the NT are intended by the NT writers to address regenerate people, not merely professing people and to express dangers to the regenerate. . . .
5. Good works is the obligatory outcome of justification but not the inevitable outcome
6. Those who God has called . . . can never fall away from salvation. . . . The preservation is guaranteed regardless of the amounts of works or lack thereof in the believer's life.
7. The motive for godly living is not found in either fear of losing salvation (Arminian) or wondering if one is saved (Experimental Predestinarian). Rather, it is to be found, negatively, in the fear of disapproval, and, positively, in gratitude for a salvation already assured and in anticipation of hearing the Master say, "Well done!"

Hodges says of the view that 1 John offers a series of tests of eternal life "it would be hard to devise an approach to John's first epistle more hopelessly misguided and more completely self-defeating." (*The Gospel Under Siege*, p. 47)

OBJECTIONS TO ANTI-LORDSHIP POSITION

Misrepresentation of adversaries – use of terms like *antinomian*, *legalist*, *works salvation* misrepresent the view of proponents of the so-called lordship advocates

A tendency to over exegete the text. Charles Bing's dissertation is an example of this. He treats his topic exegetically, which is good, but in doing so, he often over states his case. He inundates the

reader with exegetical data as if to argue that those who hold to lordship simple need to look into the text. The truth is as simple as understanding the vocabulary and grammar. For example, see Bing, p. 66-67 where he discusses *metanoeo* and *epistrepho* and says “Nevertheless, it cannot be ignored that the word (*metanoeo*) is never translated “repent,” therefore any attempt to define *metanoeo* using *epistrepho* appears motivated by dogmatics.” Another example is Bing’s handling of Hebrew 5:9 (p. 29). The writer of Hebrews argues “He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him” is misunderstood by Lordship proponents. “The salvation spoken of is not salvation for hell . . . the concept of ‘salvation in Hebrews has a distinct sense not only of final deliverance from hell, but a present and future aspect that relates to the believer’s rest”

Separates repentance from faith

Separates conversion and discipleship Mt. 28:19-20

Harrison, “Must Christ Be Lord to be Savior?” “Certainly discipleship is an important aspect of our relation to Christ, but it belongs to the sphere of Christian life rather than the entrance upon that life.” (p. 14)

Separates the fruit of conversion from the act of conversion

Harrison “Instead of looking to the sufficiency of Christ and His work of redemption, one is compelled to look within to see if he has yielded himself to the Son of God. If he is conscious of times in his life when he has denied the lordship of the Master (and who has not?) then he must logically question his standing before God. What a wretched condition of uncertainty would then rule instead of the settled peace which is ours when we know that we are Christ’s because He died to make us His.” (p. 16) **N.B. Bob Lohnes illustration**

Denies perseverance

“Although some believe the Bible teaches that a true Christian will persevere in good works, few believe that when a man trusts Christ he can know *in advance* that he will persevere in these works. The countless warnings of the New Testament against failures of every kind ought to be sufficient to show that such a guarantee is not an integral part of Christianity.” (Hodges, *Gospel Under Siege*, 11)

Hodge, *Gospel Under Siege*, pp. 67-78 for a chapter length discussion of apostasy but not loss of eternal life (better a lack of eternal life). “The view that a Christian cannot apostatize is at bottom a theological, rather than an exegetical, conviction. Since it is not supported by the Bible, it ought to be given up.” (p. 77)

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