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The Battle For Continuing Faith

by David Dunlap

Evangelical Christians have never doubted the necessity of faith for salvation. Since the days of the early church, the importance of faith in Christ as the means or “agency” of our salvation has been loudly proclaimed. During the Protestant Reformation in Europe, the cry of the Reformers was “solo gratis” and “solo fide”; that is, salvation is by grace through faith alone in the finished work of Jesus Christ. Some outside the fold of the evangelical church have insisted on conditions, terms, and “works” plus faith as a basis for salvation. These groups have never stood on the bedrock of New Testament doctrine but have relied on the writings of philosophy, the church fathers, and church dogma.

However, over the last thirty years, a growing number within the evangelical church have introduced a radical twist. They rightly teach that salvation is by grace through faith, but then comes the twist—one does not need to continue to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ in order to be saved. Our salvation, it is said, is so rooted in grace that faith is only needed as the door to Christ. Once entrance is made to Christ by faith, this saving faith is no longer necessary for our salvation. Some see this view as the purest form of Dispensationalism; however, many others view this position as serious departure from traditional Dispensationalism. This “Free Grace” position is taught by leading evangelical pastors, theologians, and seminary professors. The Grace Theological Society, through its conferences and publications, has provided this movement with scholarly teaching resources. In many other areas, these Christian leaders have proven themselves to be sound ministers of the gospel and have been greatly used in the work of God. Two of the more prominent leaders of this view are theologian Zane Hodges, a former professor of theology at Dallas Theological Seminary, and pastor Charles Stanley, of the First Baptist Church in Atlanta, GA.

Is Continued Faith Necessary for Salvation?

The traditional evangelical view is that a true believer in Christ will continue in his faith. Yes, a believer will have periods of doubt, his conduct will not always be pleasing to Christ, and he will fail in his obedience to Christ; however, he will never totally lose his belief that Christ is his Savior. Proponents of the “Free Grace” position insist that this view is unbiblical. In his book entitled *Eternal Security-Can You Be Sure?*, Dr. Charles Stanley explains that a true believer does not need to continue in faith. He emphatically states that ongoing faith is not necessary for salvation. He writes:

“The Bible clearly teaches that God’s love for His people is of such magnitude that even those who walk away from the faith have not the slightest chance of slipping from His hand.”¹

“Will a believer be saved, no matter into what course of sin he may fall, and die in? ...we consider that salvation includes, not only full deliverance from the future consequences of sin, but from the present power and practice thereof. And, hence, if we find a person living in sin, and yet talking about his assurance of salvation, we look upon him as an antinomian, and not a saved person at all...”

C. H. Mackintosh

Author of Notes on the Pentateuch

In another place he writes:

“When the Philippian jailer asked Paul and Silas what he must do to be saved, they did not tell him to begin believing and maintain a believing attitude. The focus here is the act of his believing, not the maintenance of his faith or even the intention to maintain his faith. If one must keep believing to stay saved, why didn’t Paul and Silas explain this fact to the jailer? The obvious answer is that Paul and Silas did not believe salvation was the result of continuing faith.”²

It misses the mark to say that one only needs faith for salvation and then never needs it again. The very word “faith” in the Greek New Testament indicates ongoing belief in Christ. The Greek verb for faith, *pisteuo*, is usually found in the continuous present tense in the New Testament. *Pisteuo* is in only a very few cases found in the aorist, indicating one-time action. Therefore, the overall pattern of the use of *pisteuo* in the New Testament indicates that faith in a believer’s life will be continuous and vital.

Evangelical Antinomianism

Proponents of this view argue that a person, after initially expressing faith in Christ, may turn his back on Christ, reject the faith, and fall into a life of immorality; nevertheless, this person is saved and kept eternally by the grace of God. Tom Stegall, the author of an article entitled “Must Faith Endure for Salvation to Be Sure?”, argues that a person can continue in a life of sin, show no marks of true faith, deny the faith, even follow Satan, and yet be a Christian.

“The Bible actually teaches that it is possible for one who is eternally saved by God’s grace to: commit idolatry and apostasy; believe only for a while; not continue in the word of Christ; not abide in Christ; resist God’s chastening and correction unto the point of physical death; stray from the faith; shipwreck faith; fall away from the faith; deny the faith; cast off initial faith and follow Satan; stray from the faith by professing false doctrine; deny Christ and be faithless.”³

Charles Stanley also teaches that a person can deny the faith, continue in a life of sin, and still be a Christian. Stanley, anticipating the question of how this can be, illustrates how initial faith is all that is necessary for salvation:

“God does not require a constant attitude of faith in order to be saved—only an act of faith...If I chose to have a tattoo put on my arm, that would involve a one-time act on my part. Yet the tattoo would remain with me indefinitely. I don’t have to maintain an attitude of fondness of tattoos to ensure that the tattoo remains on my arm. In fact, I may change my mind the minute I receive it. But that does not change the fact that I have a tattoo on my arm... Forgiveness/salvation is applied at the moment of faith. It is not the same thing as faith. And its permanence is not contingent upon the permanence of one’s faith.”⁴

It is hard to believe that this is the same doctrine that so overwhelmed Martin Luther and birthed the Protestant Reformation. For Luther’s study of Romans convinced him that the “just shall live by faith” (Rom. 1:17), not that the “just shall walk away from faith” and nonetheless are saved. The Scriptures emphasize that transforming faith will so grip a believer that he will desire to live a holy life. As a new creature in Christ, a believer is not only “declared righteous” but lives righteously by the power of the Holy Spirit residing within (2 Cor. 5:17).

“Scripture does not support the view that a true believer can totally lose his faith. True faith is the kind that produces good works. As Jesus said in the parable of the soils, saving faith is not in those ‘who believe for a while’, but such faith bears fruit”.

Norman Geisler
from *Four Views on Eternal Security*, Zondervan, 2002

Will Non-Believers Be Forced to Go to Heaven?

This teaching raises a very awkward issue for its proponents. If initial faith is all that is necessary for salvation, and if those who turn their backs on Christ and the faith are nevertheless saved, will those who do not want to go to heaven go, regardless? Amazingly, the answer to this question from “Free Grace” advocates is an emphatic , Yes.

A number of years ago, Zane Hodges was invited to a summer Bible conference in Pennsylvania for a week of Bible teaching. In the afternoon, there was a question-and-answer period with the speakers. Mr. Hodges had been teaching that initial faith was all that was necessary for eternal salvation. He had explained that a person could deny the Lord and turn his back on his faith, and he still possessed eternal life and was on his way to heaven. An attendee at the conference raised his hand to ask a question concerning Zane Hodges’s teaching. He said, “Mr. Hodges, if a person had initial faith, but has since turned his back on Christ, and did not want to go to heaven, would he go to heaven nonetheless?” Hodges replied, “He would go to heaven even though he did not want to go.”⁵

Some observers have noticed a parallel between this view and Hyper-Calvinism. While “Free Grace” advocates go to some lengths to distance themselves from Calvinism, nonetheless there is an important similarity. Hyper-Calvinism has all but removed man’s free will or human responsibility from the area of eternal salvation. In like manner, “Free Grace” proponents have removed human responsibility from the area of eternal security. In the “Free Grace” view, God’s sovereign grace is so extensive that after an “act of faith” all human responsibility or free will is denied.

Is Continued Faith A Works-Salvation Teaching?

Proponents of this view argue that an essential theological truth is at stake. They contend that if one teaches that continued faith is necessary for salvation, then that position is tantamount to a works-salvation gospel. Charles Stanley argues that continued faith is maintained by activities of self effort such as prayer and Bible study. If one insists that salvation is conditioned on faith, then that person is in danger of teaching a works-salvation gospel. He writes:

“If my faith maintains my salvation, I must ask myself, ‘what must I do to maintain my faith?’ For to neglect the cultivation of my faith is to run the risk of weakening or losing my faith and thus my salvation. I have discovered that my faith is maintained and strengthened by activities such as the following: prayer, Bible study, Christian fellowship, church attendance, and evangelism. If these and similar activities are necessary to maintain my faith—and maintenance of my faith is necessary for salvation—how can I avoid the conclusion that I am saved by my good works?”⁶

Circular reasoning is usually evidence of a weak argument. And so it is here. Instead of arguing that Christian disciplines prop up faith, should we not argue the very opposite? Is not faith the engine and the fuel of all of Christian living? The Scriptures teach that the believer should “walk by faith”(2 Cor. 5:7); “Stand fast in faith”(1 Cor. 16:13); “...the victory that overcomes the world, even our faith”(1 Tim. 5:4). Does not the principle of faith in a believer’s life drive him to the disciplines of prayer, evangelism, and Bible study rather than the other way around? Faith may indeed be strengthened by these disciplines, but it is a desperate leap to suppose such faith results in a works-salvation message.

Moreover, does not the prayer ministry of Christ assure continued faith in the believer’s life? Just prior to His arrest, the Lord Jesus Christ said to Peter,

“Holiness, we all agree, is so imperative that without it no one shall see the Lord; and the professing Christian who does not pursue it only deceives himself. It is false and misleading to let people fancy that they may be real saints, yet unholy. ”

William Kelly

(1820-1906)

British Dispensational
writer

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"Simon, Simon, behold Satan has desired to have you, that he might sift you as wheat: But I have prayed for you, that your faith fail not: and when you are converted, strengthen the brethren"(Luke 22:31-32). Peter would wrestle with doubt and fear for his life, yet his faith in Christ would never fail. It was guaranteed by the prayer of Christ. It should be remembered that doubt and faith are not mutually exclusive. After Peter denied the Lord, he went out and wept, indicating faith in Christ but shame that he had failed his Lord. We can be assured that this same ministry of Christ is exercised on behalf of believers today. Faith is the indisputable mark of Christ's ongoing ministry in the believer's life.

To continue in faith and to be faithful to Christ are not the same thing. True believers are not always faithful. They, like Peter, may fail in their obedience to Christ, but they do not lose their salvation; for the Lord Jesus Christ promised, "I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand"(John 10:28). Many of the great saints of Scripture *failed Him*, but did not *lose their faith in Him*. Abraham, Lot, David, John the Baptist, and Peter all failed the Lord; but Scripture never records one example of anyone anywhere who was known to be saved, and then completely gave up their faith in God.

"Free Grace" proponents have the worthy intention of preserving the doctrine of justification by faith alone. However, that doctrine becomes distorted when faith is redefined in an unbiblical manner. May we guard against the teaching that suggests a Christian does not need to continue on in faith in Christ. For the writer of Hebrews charges us, "Now the just shall live by faith; but if any man draw back, my soul shall have not pleasure in him" (Hebrews 10:38).

Endnotes

1. Charles Stanley, *Eternal Security*, (Nashville, TN: Oliver Nelson, 1990), p. 74
2. Charles Stanley, *Eternal Security*, (Nashville, TN: Oliver Nelson, 1990), p. 88
3. Tom Stegall, "Must Faith Endure for Salvation to Be Sure?", Fall 2003, *Grace Family Journal*, Duluth, MN
4. Charles Stanley, *Eternal Security*, (Nashville, TN: Oliver Nelson, 1990), p. 80
5. As told by Jean Gibson, California, an invited speaker to the same conference.
6. Charles Stanley, *Eternal Security*, (Nashville, TN: Oliver Nelson, 1990), p. 87

