

WAYNE GRUDEM ON GENUINE FAITH

BY SHAWN LAZAR

Wayne Grudem is one of the best-known Evangelical theologians writing today. His *Systematic Theology* has sold over 400,000 copies. It's a model for making academic theology accessible and often the first systematic theology I consult from my library.

When Grudem speaks, people listen, including me.

That's why I'm grateful he wrote a critique of Free Grace theology. As the saying goes, there's no such thing as bad press. If Grudem's critique brings more attention to Free Grace views, then I'm glad for it.

He made at least two presentations on Free Grace theology: a shorter one given at his church ("The Historic Protestant Viewpoint and the Free Grace Viewpoint on Conversion"); and a longer one presented at the Evangelical Theological Society in 2014 ("Salvation without Repentance from Sin? A Critique of the 'Free Grace' Gospel").

This article will address the longer presentation, specifically, Grudem's definition of "genuine faith."

I argue his definition is harmful, because it makes it virtually impossible for anyone to know for sure whether they believe in Jesus and are saved.

Grudem's Complaint

The main point of Grudem's longer critique was to show the Free Grace doctrine of "faith alone" is different from the Reformation doctrine of "faith alone." He believes the difference centers on the meaning of the term "alone."

The Reformers meant that faith is "alone" in the sense of being the only thing that counts in justification (pp. 3, 5), and not in the sense that faith is never accompanied by other things (like repentance, obedience, and love, etc).

By contrast, Free Gracers supposedly believe faith is "alone" in the sense of never being accompanied by other things:

So I ask Free Grace advocates: where in the entire history of mainstream evangelical Protestantism since the Reformation, did you ever find the idea that 'justification by faith alone' means 'faith that is not accompanied by repentance or good works'? It is not there (p. 5).

The better question might be, "Where in the history of the Free Grace movement has anyone taught that faith is never accompanied by other things?"²

In any case, Grudem's argument is that the only faith that justifies is one accompanied by a great many things. And that runs Grudem into some serious problems.

Of Accompaniments and Components

On first glance, you would think Grudem believes in salvation by faith apart from works. But dig a little deeper and you'll see the opposite is true.

Grudem distinguishes between what "accompanies" faith and the "components" of faith.

Grudem assures us that even though faith is accompanied by many other things, faith itself "is the only thing that God responds to with the act of justification" (p. 5), and "nothing else counts" but faith (p. 5). Faith is "accompanied by other things," but "God does not count those other things as any part of the means of obtaining justification" (p. 6).

This is good. Very good. Faith is the only thing that counts and there is no other means of obtaining justification.

We can agree on that...if only Grudem really believed it!

Sadly, what Grudem offers with his right hand, he immediately takes back with his left. He *begins* by drawing a strong distinction between faith and the things that accompany it, but he *ends* by suggesting at least some of these accompaniments are actually components of faith. That subtle transition is apparent in his discussion of repentance.

On the one hand, Grudem says that faith is always accompanied by repentance (pp. 6-7). But later on he

says that "repentance from sins is a *component* of truly turning to Christ in faith for salvation from sin" (p. 8, emphasis added).

So long as something is merely an *accompaniment* to faith, Grudem could technically claim he believed in justification by faith alone. That is, he could technically claim that, while he believed that faith is always accompanied by other things (like repentance),

we aren't justified because of those other things. (But even then, I think I would have grounds to question whether Grudem really believes in justification by faith alone. After all, if you can't be justified by faith apart from other things, then logically, that implies those accompaniments are part of the condition of justification.)

However, if Grudem says that something is a *component* of faith, then he cannot claim to believe in justification by faith apart from those other things, because those other things are now part of what it means to believe. Hence, if the components of faith include works, then despite his claims to the contrary, Grudem would not believe in justification by faith apart from works, even in a technical sense.

Do you see why?

If not, imagine Grudem was talking about circumcision instead of repentance.

Imagine if he adamantly denied teaching we were justified by faith *plus* circumcision, but insisted that circumcision was a *component* of genuine faith. In other words, if you really believed, you'd be circumcised. I hope you see that's a distinction without a

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difference, because circumcision would be part of the condition of salvation either way.

And that's the fundamental problem with Grudem's definition of "genuine faith." Everything he thinks is a component of faith necessarily becomes part of the condition of salvation. If, for example, he thinks a *work* is a component of faith, then he necessarily believes that work is a condition of salvation.

So the question is, does Grudem ever make works a component of genuine faith?

The Big List

Grudem hints there are several components of genuine faith besides mental assent and repentance (e.g., "heartfelt trust," p. 18). Unfortunately, he stops short of giving us a comprehensive list of what those might be.

That's quite surprising.

If he believes our eternal destiny depends on having these components, shouldn't Grudem tell us what they are? Shouldn't they be part of an evangelistic presentation? I would certainly want to know!

I searched Grudem's paper for hints of what these other components might be and came up with a list of 30 different possibilities. Let me emphasize that these are just possibilities. Grudem doesn't explicitly identify these as "components," but if you look up the references, I'm sure you'll agree that is the impression.

Here is the list:

- Repentance from sin (p. 7)
- A sincere commitment to turn from sin (p. 8)
- Turning to Christ (p. 8)
- Heart commitment (p. 8)
- Coming into God's presence (p. 9)
- Crying out as Isaiah did (p. 9)
- Seeking forgiveness (p. 9)
- Deep, heartfelt sorrow for sin (p. 9)
- Resolving to turn from sin (p. 9)
- Giving up all our possessions (p. 9)
- Giving half of our goods to the poor (p. 9)
- Repaying fourfold the things we steal (p. 9)
- Regretting past conduct (p. 11)
- Abiding in Jesus (p. 13)
- Mental assent (p. 18)
- Coming before the person of Christ (p. 18)
- Trusting (p. 18)
- Trusting in the person of Christ (p. 18)
- Having a personal encounter (p. 18)

- Coming into Christ's presence (p. 18)
- Realizing Christ is your God (p. 18)
- Realizing He is King and Lord forever (p. 18)
- Believing in His omnipotence (p. 18)
- Believing in His omniscience (p. 18)
- Believing He is the eternal creator and sustainer of the universe (p. 18)
- Believing He is infinitely holy (p. 18)
- Not clinging to sin (p. 18)
- Having interpersonal interaction with Christ (p. 19)
- Believing with your heart (not just mental assent) (p. 21)
- Believing with deepest emotions (p. 21)
- Believing with deepest conviction (p. 21)

As you can see this is a very long list. And I'm not sure it's comprehensive. There may be more components Grudem hasn't mentioned. For example, Grudem says saving faith does not include things like:

- Absolute, total commitment of life (p. 12)
- Obedience—although true faith results in obedience (p. 12)

So, even if "absolute" commitment isn't a component of saving faith, would Grudem say that at least *some* commitment is? After all, he denies that anyone who is still clinging to sin has genuine faith (p. 18). If you need to stop clinging to sin, then you need to obey at least a little bit to really believe, don't you?

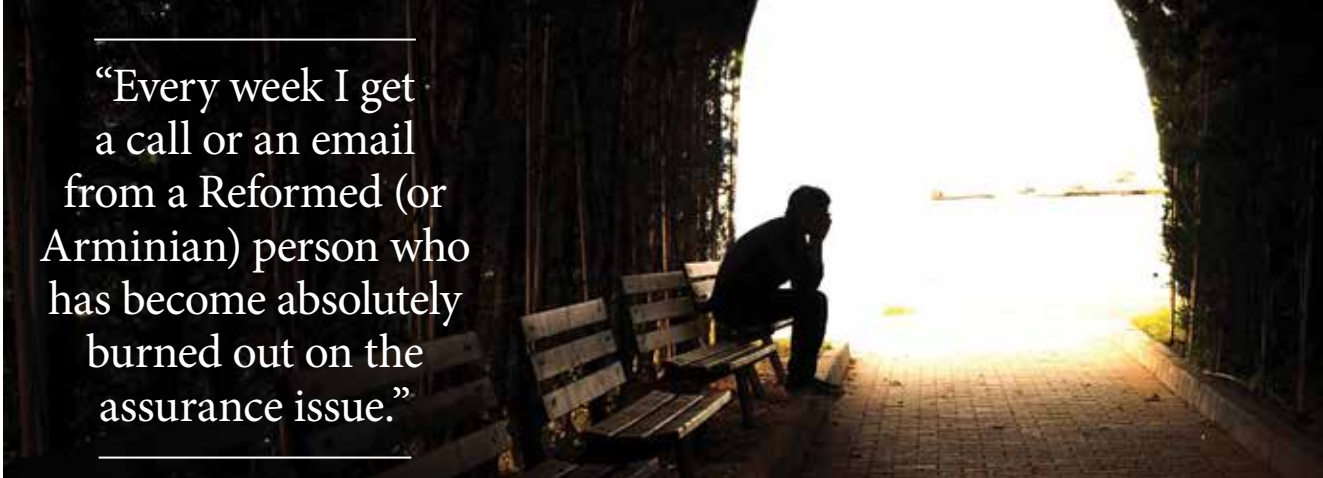
And think of the other work-like components in the list. Genuine faith includes repenting, committing, turning, coming, crying out, seeking, giving, and abiding. Those are not just states of mind. They're activities. They involve changes in behavior. They're works.

Why Grudem's Definition of Faith Leads to Doubt

Now, I'm sure if Grudem saw my list he would quibble here and there and say I'm making distinctions that don't really exist, or have included things he wouldn't really include as components, or that I've misread him or misunderstood him.

I admit that's all possible.

However, I would also suggest that Grudem's presentation lends itself to those kinds of misunderstandings.



“Every week I get a call or an email from a Reformed (or Arminian) person who has become absolutely burned out on the assurance issue.”

And that’s another devastating problem with his definition of faith. It’s slippery. It’s uncertain. It’s hard to pin down. It’s hard to tell what, exactly, faith is supposed to be or what components it’s supposed to have.

Anyone hearing or reading Grudem’s presentation would walk away completely confused about the condition of eternal life. Yes, they would know it was something called “faith,” but they wouldn’t know what “faith” was or if they had it.

For example, think of how highly subjective and vague most of Grudem’s implied components are, and how many unanswerable questions they raise.

Is the list exhaustive? Were some components left out? If so, what are they?

How many of the components are necessary for saving faith? Can you mix and match? Is having five enough? How about ten? Or do you need all thirty (or more) to have genuine saving faith?

Even if you have most of the components now, how do you know if you’ll have them in the future?

How intensely must you experience these components? For example, how much regret do you have to feel to have genuine faith? How much sorrow? How much resolve? Is there a percentage of intensity? If so, what is that percentage? What if you only feel 49% regret, is that enough for your faith to be genuine?

What if that intensity goes up and down over time—do you gain and lose your salvation?

What if you aren’t a very emotional person to begin with—does God judge the intensity of your regret on a sliding scale?

How can you tell when you’ve entered God’s presence, or if you’ve left it?

How do you know if you’ve stopped clinging to sin—is it a matter of behavior, attitude, a state of mind, or some combination of all three?

As I said, I think these questions are unanswerable. How could you possibly know if you had “genuine faith”?

Grudem recognizes the difficulty.

In a masterful example of understatement, he admits his understanding of faith “makes assurance more complex” and “makes the question of whether a person has genuine faith more complex” (p. 19).

I should say so!

Actually, I would say it makes the question *impossibly* complex! There’s no way anyone holding to this view of faith could ever be sure they believed or were saved.

It’s ironic that Grudem thinks the Free Grace movement commits the category mistake of focusing on assurance of eternal salvation when we should be focusing on having assurance that we’ve genuinely believed (p. 15). It’s ironic, because Grudem is projecting upon us a problem created by his own faulty theology. He’s like a Freudian psychologist insisting we should all be dealing with our “mother issues” because of his own complicated relationship with his mother. Just so, Grudem has created a situation where it is impossible to know if he has really believed, and assumes we should all struggle with the same question.

Actually, Grudem’s charge that we have committed a category error only illustrates why the Free Grace movement has tried so hard to move people away from basing their assurance on the kind of morbid introspection required by Grudem’s theology, to the only proper grounds of assurance, i.e., to Jesus’ promise of everlasting life. Assurance is only found outside of us, in simply believing Christ’s promise “to me,” and not found within us, in some subjective *experience* of believing.

The Joy of Clarity

Every week I get a call or an email from a Reformed (or Arminian) person who has become absolutely burned out on the assurance issue.

They're burned out because when they asked their pastor or friend how to be sure, they were given an answer like Grudem's. They're told to look to see if they have genuine faith. They're told to look for signs in their lives that indicate they have really believed (or have been given special faith from God). They were told to look for the kind of components Grudem mentions.

Did they really make a heart commitment?

Are they really relying on Jesus?

Are they still sinning?

Are their thoughts purer than before?

Did they really feel sorrow?

Have they really resolved to abandon their sins?

Basing their assurance on these types of criteria only leads to more doubt (at least, for conscientious people). Why? Because their lives are inconsistent.

Once they start introspecting, they might see some good, but they also see lots of bad. They might remember having memorable spiritual experiences that encourages them of their salvation, but time passes and they're not so sure anymore. They see they were faithful at times, but not always, and aren't sure if they'll be faithful in the future. In fact, thinking about their future performance brings in even more doubt than before. What if they don't continue believing? What if the "genuine faith" they seem to have now only turns out to be the faith of a so-called "reprobate"?

Instead of leading to assurance, morbid introspection leads to monstrous uncertainty. It leads to conscientious people being filled with doubts and fears of hell. It leads to getting burned out.

Then they hear the message of God's free grace.

They hear the simple message of John's Gospel, with its repeated emphasis on faith in Christ for everlasting life.

Contrary to what Grudem teaches, faith in Jesus' promise is simple. It's like faith in anything else. You are presented with a proposition—in this case Jesus' promise—and you either believe it is true, or you don't.

For example, do you believe you live in the U.S.: yes or no?

Do you believe you are married: yes or no?

Do you believe you went to college: yes or no?

Do you believe you are reading this magazine: yes or no?

And how do you know if you've believed? It doesn't matter how you feel, how you've acted, if you've had an encounter, if you've felt remorse, and so on.

You either believe it is true, or not.

You know whether you believe something or not immediately. It is self-evident and automatic.

It's the same with Jesus' promise of everlasting life.

Do you believe that Jesus' promise is true for you: yes or no?

If you say "yes," or have ever said "yes," you have everlasting life that can never be lost (John 10:28-29).

If you answer, "no," or if you say, "I believe it is true for *someone*, but I'm not sure if it's true *for me*," I would urge you to read the Gospel of John until you are sure.

Read Jesus' promises out loud (John 3:16, 36; 5:24; 6:47; 11:26).

Read them a thousand times if you have to.

Faith doesn't come by looking to your emotions, behaviors, or any other subjective feelings, experiences or commitments. Rather, "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom 10:17).

That's what assurance is based on—not on what you have done, but on what Jesus has promised to do. ■



Shawn Lazar is Director of Publications for Grace Evangelical Society. His books, *Chosen to Serve: A Vocational View of Election* and *Zero Pointer: Why I Am Neither Calvinist nor Arminian* are forthcoming.

1. See Grudem's ETS paper here: <http://www.waynegrudem.com/salvation-without-repentance-ets-2014>.

See a response to his shorter paper here: Charles C. Bing, Joseph Dillow, Roger Fankhauser, John Correia, "A Free Grace Alliance Response to Wayne Grudem's 'The Historic Protestant Viewpoint and The Free Grace Viewpoint on Conversion'" at http://www.freegracealliance.com/pdf/Response%20to%20Wayne%20Grudem_06252014fga.pdf. Accessed, April 15, 2016.

2. Grudem might simply be making the point that, unlike many Reformers, most Free Gracers are not theological determinists or monergists. We do not believe God only gives the gift of faith to the predestined few and then causes them to become spiritually mature (so that faith is *always* accompanied by other things). Rather, we believe that faith is a natural ability, that it's defectible, and that spiritual growth is conditional (meaning faith can and should be accompanied by other things, but not always).