**Grace to You** :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

**Clarifying the Lordship Debate, Part 2**
Scripture: John 3:36; John 14:15; John 14:21; Acts 26:19-20; Romans 6:18; Romans 8:28-30; 1 Corinthians 16:22; 2 Corinthians 3:18; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Philippians 1:6; 1 Thessalonians 1:9; Titus 2:12; Hebrews 12:5-11; 2 Peter 1:4; 1 John 2:3; 1 John 3:4-10; 1 John 4:19; 3 John 11
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**The lordship controversy is not a dispute about whether salvation is by faith only or by faith plus works.** No true Christian would ever suggest that works need to be added to faith in order to secure salvation. No one who properly interprets Scripture would ever propose that human effort or fleshly works can be meritorious —worthy of honor or reward from God.? (We emphasize this again just to make the point.)

Instead, the lordship controversy *is* a disagreement over the nature of true faith. Those whohave truefaith will love Christ (Romans 8:28; 1 Corinthians 16:22; 1 John 4:19). They will therefore want to do His bidding. Jesus as Lord is far more than just an authority figure; He's also our highest treasure and most precious companion. We obey Him out of sheer delight. So the gospel demands surrender, not only for authority's sake, but also because surrender is the believer's highest joy. Such surrender is not an extraneous adjunct to faith; it is the very essence of believing.

**Lordship salvation does not teach true Christians are perfect or sinless.** Wholehearted commitment to Christ does not mean that we never disobey or that we live perfect lives. The vestiges of our sinful flesh make it inevitable that we will often do what we do not want to do (Romans 7:15). But commitment to Christ does mean that obedience rather than disobedience will be our distinguishing trait. God will deal with the sin in our lives and we will respond to His loving chastisement by becoming more holy (Hebrews 12:5-11). Those with true faith will fail—and in some cases, frequently—but a genuine believer will, as a pattern of life, confess his sin and come to the Father for forgiveness (1 John 1:9).

There is no question thatChristians sin. They disobey. They fail. We all fall far short of perfection in this life (Philippians 3:12-5). "We all stumble in many ways" (James 3:2). Even the most mature and godly Christians "see in a mirror dimly" (1 Corinthians 13:12). Our minds need constant renewing (Romans 12:2). But that doesn't invalidate the truth that salvation in some real sense makes us practically righteous. The same epistle that describes the Christian's hatred of and battle with sin (Romans 7:8-24) first says that believers are free from sin and slaves of righteousness (Romans 6:18). The same apostle who wrote, "If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves" (1 John 1:8) later wrote, "No one who abides in Him sins" (1 John 3:6). In one place he says, "If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us" (1 John1:10 ), and in another,

"No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in Him" (1 John 3:9).

There's a true paradox—not an inconsistency—in those truths. All Christians sin (1 John 1:8), but all Christians also obey: "By this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments" (1 John 2:3). Sin and carnality are still present with all believers (Romans 7:21), but they cannot be the hallmark of one's character (Romans 6:22).

Scripture clearly and repeatedly confirms the lordship viewpoint on this matter: "Beloved, do not imitate what is evil, but what is good. The one who does good is of God; the one who does evil has not seen God" (3 John 11). That speaks of direction, not perfection. But it clearly makes behavior a test of faith's reality.

**The sinner's role in salvation is not the main issue in the lordship controversy. The heart of the debate deals with how much God does in redeeming the elect.**

What happens at regeneration? Is the believing sinner really born again (John 3:3, 7; 1 Peter 1:3, 23)? Is our old self really dead, "crucified . . . that we should no longer be slaves to sin" (Romans 6:6)? Are believers really "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4)? Is it true that "if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come" (2 Corinthians 5:17)? Can we really say, "Having been freed from sin, [we are] slaves of righteousness" (Romans 6:18 )?

Lordship salvation says yes.

This, after all, is the whole point of redemption: "Whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son" (Rom. 8:29). Does that conforming work of God—sanctification—begin in this lifetime? Again, lordship salvation says yes.

Scripture agrees. "We all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory" (2 Corinthians 3:18). Though "it has not appeared as yet what we shall be," it is nevertheless certain that "when He appears, we shall be like Him. . . . And everyone who has this hope fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure" (1 John 3:2-3).

There's more: "Whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified" (Romans 8:30). Notice God's part in salvation begins with election and ends in glory. In between, every aspect of the redemptive process is God's work, not the sinner's. God will neither terminate the process nor omit any aspect of it.

Titus 3:5 is clear: Salvation—all of it—is "not on the basis of deeds which we have done." It is God's work, done "according to His mercy." It is not merely a declaratory transaction, legally securing a place in heaven but leaving the sinner captive to his sin. It involves a transformation of the disposition, the very nature, through "the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit" as well.

*The question is not whether we're saved by grace, but how grace operates in salvation.* No-lordship advocates love to portray themselves as champions of grace. But they characterize grace in an anemic way that misses the whole point. God's grace is a spiritual dynamic that works in the lives of the redeemed, "instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age" (Titus 2:12). True grace is more than just a giant freebie, opening the door to heaven in the sweet by and by, but leaving us to wallow in sin in the bitter here and now. Grace is God presently at work in our lives. By grace "we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10). By grace He "gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds" (Titus 2:14).

That ongoing work of grace in the Christian's life is as much a certainty as justification, glorification, or any other aspect of God's redeeming work. "I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6). Salvation is wholly God's work, and He finishes what He starts. His grace is sufficient. And potent. It cannot be defective in any regard. "Grace" that does not affect one's behavior is not the grace of God.

**Repentance is not incidental to the gospel.** What is the gospel, after all, but a call to repentance (Acts 2:38; 3:19; 17:30)? In other words, it demands that sinners make a change—stop going one way and turn around to go the other (1 Thessalonians 1:9). Paul's evangelistic invitations always demanded repentance: "God is now declaring to men that all everywhere should repent" (Acts 17:30). Here's how Paul described His own ministry and message: "I did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision, but kept declaring both to those of Damascus first, and also at Jerusalem and then throughout all the region of Judea, and even to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, *performing deeds appropriate to repentance*" (Acts 26:19-20, emphasis added). Repentance is what leads to life (Acts 11:18) and to the knowledge of the truth (2 Timothy 2:25). Thus salvation is impossible apart from repentance.

Advocates of the no-lordship position frequently suggest that preaching repentance adds something to the biblical doctrine of salvation by grace through faith alone.

But faith presupposes repentance. How can those who are mortal enemies of God (Romans 5:10) sincerely believe in His Son without repenting? How can anyone truly comprehend the truth of salvation from sin and its consequences, unless that person also genuinely understands and hates

what sin is? The whole sense of faith is that we trust Christ to liberate us from the power and penalty of sin. Therefore sinners cannot come to sincere faith apart from a complete change of heart, a turnaround of the mind and affections and will. That is repentance. It is not a supplement to the gospel invitation; it is precisely what the gospel demands. Our Lord Himself described His primary mission as that of calling sinners to repentance (Matthew 9:13).

We often speak of the salvation experience as "conversion." That is biblical terminology (Matthew 18:3; John 12:40; Acts 15:3). Conversion and repentance are closely related terms. Conversion occurs when a sinner turns to God in repentant faith. It is a complete turnaround, an absolute change of moral and volitional direction. Such a radical reversal is the response the gospel calls for, whether the plea to sinners is phrased as "believe," "repent," or "be converted." Each entails the others.

If someone is walking away from you and you say, "Come here," it is not necessary to say " turn around and come." The U-turn is implied in the direction "come." In like manner, when our Lord says, "Come to Me" (Matt. 11:28), the about-face of repentance is understood. Nowhere does Scripture issue an evangelistic appeal that does not at least imply the necessity of repentance. Our Lord offers nothing to impenitent sinners (Matthew 9:13 ; Mark 2:17 ; Luke 5:32).

*Again, repentance is not a human work.* Jesus said, "No one can come to Me, unless the Father who sent Me draws him" (John 6:44). It is God who grants repentance (Acts 11:18; 2 Tim. 2:25). Repentance is not pre-salvation self-improvement. It is not a question of atoning for sin or making restitution before turning to Christ in faith. It is an inward turning from sin to Christ. Though it is not itself a "work" the sinner performs, genuine repentance will certainly produce good works as its inevitable fruit (Matthew 3:8).

(Abridged from *The Gospel According to the Apostles* by John MacArthur).

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