

Clarifying the Lordship Debate, Part 1

Scripture: John 3:36; John 14:15; John 14:21; Romans 8:28; 1 Corinthians 16:22; 1 John 3:4–10; 1 John 4:19

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Comparing the No-Lordship Views

The 9 specific tenets of lordship salvation [have already been outlined in a previous post](#) .

So what does the no-lordship camp espouse? They agree with lordship proponents that: (1) Christ's death purchased eternal salvation; (2) the saved are justified by grace through faith in Christ alone; (3) sinners cannot earn divine favor; (4) God requires no preparatory works or pre-salvation reformation; (5) eternal life is a gift of God; (6) believers are saved before their faith ever produces any righteous works; and (7) Christians can and do sin, sometimes horribly.

But they disagree on other crucial soteriological points. For example, the no-lordship advocates teach that:

1. Repentance is simply a change of mind about Christ (Charles Ryrie, *So Great Salvation*, 96, 99).?? In the context of the gospel invitation, repentance is just a synonym for faith (SGS 97-99). No turning from sin is required for salvation (SGS 99).
2. The whole of salvation, including faith, is a gift of God (SGS 96). But faith might not last. A true Christian can completely cease believing (SGS 141).
3. Saving faith is simply being convinced or giving credence to the truth of the gospel (SGS 156). It is confidence that Christ can remove guilt and give eternal life, not a personal commitment to Him (SGS 119).
4. Some spiritual fruit is inevitable in every Christian's experience. The fruit, however, might not be visible to others (SGS 45). Christians can even lapse into a state of permanent spiritual barrenness (SGS 53-54).
5. Only the judicial aspects of salvation—such as justification, adoption, imputed righteousness, and positional sanctification—are guaranteed for believers in this life (SGS 150-52). Practical sanctification and growth in grace require a postconversion act of dedication.?
6. Submission to Christ's supreme authority as Lord is not germane to the saving transaction (SGS 71-76). Neither dedication nor willingness to be dedicated to Christ are issues in salvation (SGS 74). The news that Christ died for our sins and rose from the dead is the complete gospel. Nothing else must be believed for salvation (SGS 40-41).
7. Christians may fall into a state of lifelong carnality. A whole category of "carnal Christians"—born-again people who continuously live like the unsaved—exists in the church (SGS 31, 59-66).

8. Disobedience and prolonged sin are no reason to doubt the reality of one's faith (SGS 48).

9. A believer may utterly forsake Christ and come to the point of not believing. God has guaranteed that He will not disown those who thus abandon the faith (SGS 141). Those who have once believed are secure forever, even if they turn away (SGS 143).

Some of the more radical advocates of no-lordship doctrine do not stop there. The "Free-Grace" movement further stipulates:

1. Repentance is not essential to the gospel message. In no sense is repentance related to saving faith (Zane Hodges, *Absolutely Free*, 144-46).?

2. Faith is a human act, not a gift from God (AF 219). It occurs in a decisive moment but does not necessarily continue (AF xiv, 107). True faith can be subverted, be overthrown, collapse, or even turn to unbelief (AF 111).

3. To "believe" unto salvation is to believe the facts of the gospel (AF 37-39). "Trusting Jesus" means believing the "saving facts" about Him (AF 39), and to believe those facts is to appropriate the gift of eternal life (AF 40). Those who add any suggestion of commitment have departed from the New Testament idea of salvation (AF 27).

4. Spiritual fruit is not guaranteed in the Christian life (AF 73-75, 119). Some Christians spend their lives in a barren wasteland of defeat, confusion, and every kind of evil (AF 119-25).

5. Heaven is guaranteed to believers (AF 112) but Christian victory is not (AF 118-19). One could even say "the saved" still need salvation (AF 195-99). Christ offers a whole range of postconversion deliverance experiences to supply what Christians lack (AF 196). But these other "salvations" all require the addition of human works, such as obedience, submission, and confession of Jesus as Lord (AF 74, 119, 124-25, 196). Thus God is dependent to some degree on human effort in achieving deliverance from sin in this life (AF 220).

6. Submission is not in any sense a condition for eternal life (AF 172). "Calling on the Lord" means appealing to Him, not submitting to Him (AF 193-95).

7. Nothing guarantees that a true Christian will love God (AF 130-31). Salvation does not necessarily even place the sinner in a right relationship of harmonious fellowship with God (AF 145-60).

8. If people are sure they believe, their faith must be genuine (AF 31). All who claim Christ by faith as Savior—even those involved in serious or prolonged sin—should be assured that they belong to God come what may (AF 32, 93-95). It is dangerous and destructive to question the salvation of professing Christians (AF 18-19, 91-99). The New Testament writers never questioned the reality of their readers' faith (AF 98).

9. It is possible to experience a moment of faith that guarantees heaven for eternity (AF 107), then to turn away permanently and live a life that is utterly barren of any spiritual fruit (AF 118-19). Genuine believers might even cease to name the name of Christ or confess Christianity (AF 111).

What Is Really at the Heart of the Lordship Debate?

It should be obvious that these are real doctrinal differences; the lordship controversy is not a semantic disagreement. The participants in this debate hold widely differing perspectives.

Nevertheless, the issues have often been obscured by semantic distractions, distorted interpretations of lordship teaching, mangled logic, and emotion-laden rhetoric. Often it is easier to misconstrue a point than answer it, and sadly that is the tack many have taken. All it has done is confuse the real issues.

But, to be clear, 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.?

The lordship controversy is a disagreement over the nature of true faith. Those who want to eliminate Christ's lordship from the gospel see faith as simple trust in a set of truths about Christ. Faith, as they describe it, is merely a personal appropriation of the promise of eternal life.

But Scripture describes faith as more than that—it is a wholehearted trust in Christ personally (e.g., Galatians 2:16; Philippians 3:9). Not merely faith about Him; faith in Him. Note the difference: If I say I believe some promise you have made, I am saying far less than if I say I trust you. Believing in a person necessarily involves some degree of commitment. Trusting Christ means placing oneself in His custody for both life and death. It means we rely on His counsel, trust in His goodness, and entrust ourselves for time and eternity to His guardianship. Real faith, saving faith, is all of me (mind, emotions, and will) embracing all of Him (Savior, Advocate, Provider, Sustainer, Counselor, and Lord God).

Those who have such faith will love Christ (Romans 8:28; 1 Corinthians 16:22; 1 John 4:19). They will therefore want to do His bidding. How could someone who truly believes in Christ continue to defy His authority and pursue what He hates? In this sense, then, the crucial issue for lordship salvation is not merely authority and submission, but the affections of the heart. 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.

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

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