

# MYTH *1*

Christian Life  
Views Are Similar



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*For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.*

Ephesians 2:8-10

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*For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.*

2 Corinthians 5:10

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MYTH  
*Christian Life Views Are Similar*

TRUTH  
CHRISTIAN LIFE VIEWS DIFFER

Riding home, my wife and I noticed a new billboard beside the road. Not a fan of the aesthetics of roadside advertising, I always wonder about the reliability of the information they provide. This new billboard contained not only questionable information, but also the message was heretical. Sponsored by a religious group, drawings of religious symbols were shown: the Cross (Christianity), the Star of David (Judaism), the Star and Crescent (Islam), the Om (Hinduism), etc. Above the symbols was a single light shining down on each one of them. The message read, “One Light, Many Lamps,” suggesting that there are many ways by which one can reach God. The “lamps” represent the numerous ways people seek God, the “light,” through the various religions around the world—the Baskin Robbins of the religious world. The particular flavor you choose is up to you.

### “Christian” Traditions

There are four major theological traditions within the “Christian” community: Roman Catholic, Reformed, Arminian, and Free Grace.

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Each tradition agrees that salvation is based on Christ's work on the cross, but the views differ on the extent of one's responsibility in being saved and staying saved. As a result, each group's concept of justification or position in Christ and sanctification or the daily experience of walking with Christ is different. Many say that distinctions between these views is a matter of making too much out of nothing. "It's all about semantics, so it's no problem." However, *the issue is real*. These matters pertain to salvation and fellowship with Christ. What can be more important? Clarity of the Scriptures is paramount.

### *Roman Catholic Theology*

The Roman Church teaches that going to heaven requires (1) faith plus (2) man's effort or merit.<sup>1</sup> Since man's condition was weakened by the Fall, he is not spiritually dead and can respond to God's grace.<sup>2</sup> Salvation results from a cooperation between man

#### View #1

*Man's meritorious works are necessary to obtain eternal life.*

and God, and certainty in reaching heaven is not realized until the end of a person's life.<sup>3</sup> Justification and sanctification are merged and intertwined, requiring the need for both faith and works in order to ultimately gain a righteous standing before God.

From the Roman perspective, *justification is by faith, but not by faith alone*. Ultimately salvation or one's justification in Christ cannot be known till death, since man's works complete one's righteousness before God. "Human merit [earned entitlement] is real and effective"<sup>4</sup> and is accomplished through cooperation between man and God. If there are no works, there is no justification. A spokesman writes, "Paul stresses that it is those who live according to the Spirit of God who will attain salvation."<sup>5</sup> Man's meritorious

## MYTH 1: Christian Life Views Are Similar

works are necessary to obtain eternal life. Without works, there is no salvation.

### *Reformed Theology*

During the sixteenth-century upheaval in religious thinking, the Reformers rejected the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. The Reformers broke from the Roman tradition and came to the new understanding that the Scriptures teach salvation by faith alone (Eph. 2:8-9).<sup>6</sup> They understood that they were helpless in sin and incapable of cooperating with God in salvation.<sup>7</sup> As a result, “Reformers strenuously objected to assigning any merit to our justification save the merit of Christ alone.”<sup>8</sup> Meritorious works cannot provide salvation. However, to counter Rome’s claim that this new sect was teaching antinomianism (lawlessness), and thus believers could live anyway they wanted, the Reformers began to teach that *justification is by faith alone, but faith is never really alone*. Works are not a cause of salvation, but they are the proof of one’s justification.<sup>9</sup> If works are not evident in a person’s walk, then there is no salvation.

As in the Roman Church, the Reformers then added a walk of faith or sanctification to justification. They taught that if there are no works, there is no saving faith. While works supposedly are a confirming sign of salvation, for the Reformed perspective those works are not meritorious [deserving credit].<sup>10</sup> Good works are exclusively the works of God manifested through the believer. A proponent explains,

### View #2

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## FREE TO CHOOSE

We get no credit for them [good works]. Even *our* good works are works of *His* grace....It would also be appropriate to call them “grace works”....These works, like every other aspect of divine salvation, are the product of God’s sovereign grace.<sup>11</sup>

In Reformed thinking there is no cooperation with God at regeneration and likewise there is essentially no cooperation during sanctification. A Reformed scholar writes, “God works in us and we also work. But the relation is that *because* God works we work.”<sup>12</sup> The following comment provides further perspective.

For Rome grace makes human merit possible. For the Reformers grace makes such merit [human merit] impossible. If we do what we do by grace, then it is seriously misleading to speak of merit at all.<sup>13</sup>

Good works are exclusively the product and validation of God working in the life of the believer. God is the source and cause of good works. The absence of works proves that the individual was never saved. Without that proof, there is no salvation.

### *Arminian Theology*

Arminianism also arose during the sixteenth century, teaching that salvation is indeed based on faith alone. However, Arminianism deviated from the Reformed view by emphasizing a clear distinction between justification and sanctification. Sanctification is a continuum that begins from the moment of justification and the new birth.<sup>14</sup> One spokesman writes,

The life of sanctification springs from the regenerated life created by the new birth and continues as the Holy Spirit... calls them [believers] to moment-by-moment obedience to

## MYTH 1: Christian Life Views Are Similar

the will of God, which is the expression of His holiness and love.<sup>15</sup>

Understanding that the “Fall did not destroy man’s free will,” God’s preparatory grace “moves upon...the unbeliever, enabling him to cooperate with God” and respond to God’s call.<sup>16</sup> Rather than being passive in regeneration, as in Reformed theology,<sup>17</sup> faith is an active choice, an act of the will.<sup>18</sup> God’s grace can be accepted or rejected. Once salvation is established, sanctification through man’s meritorious works is the “logical consequence” of one’s justification by faith.<sup>19</sup> Obviously this teaching was a reaction not only to Rome’s view that man’s works complete justification, but also to the Reformed view’s “abhorrence to the merit of man’s works.”<sup>20</sup>

While Arminians teach that a relationship with God is “established by the merit of Christ rather than the merit of personal good works,”<sup>21</sup> the continuation of that relationship is dependent on the believer’s good works. Even though God provides assisting grace for the Christian walk, there “remains within the power of the free will to reject the grace bestowed and to refuse subsequent grace.”<sup>22</sup> As a result, “believers may lose their salvation because the human will remains free and so may rescind its earlier faith in Christ by choosing sin.”<sup>23</sup> Salvation is by faith alone, but salvation’s permanence depends on works. A person can possess salvation, but he can lose it. If a believer does not live the Christian life (if works are absent), then this voids any previous possession of salvation. As a result, salvation must be acquired again and again. For Arminianism, works are necessary to retain eternal life.

### View #3

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The Arminian position again adds the word “but” to salvation. From the Roman perspective, *justification is by faith, but not by faith alone*. The Reformed approach holds that *justification is by faith alone, but not by faith that is alone*. And Arminians teach that *justification is by faith alone, but justification may be lost*. Whenever “but” is interjected, it is a huge red flag, one to be avoided because it eliminates any possibility of salvation by faith completely alone.

### *Free Grace Theology*

During the twentieth century several church leaders continued to reject the teachings of the Roman Church position, but they spoke out against both Reformed and Arminian theology as well.<sup>24</sup> Their conclusion from Scripture was that *justification is by faith alone*,

#### View #4

*The believer's  
good works in  
sanctification  
are the actual  
meritorious works  
of the believer.*

apart from any human effort.<sup>25</sup> From the Free Grace position, no works of any kind produce, prove, or sustain justification. Not a single work—prior, during, or after justification.

Not surprisingly opposition arose. Opponents charged that this new teaching would allow anyone to live anyway he so desires. *Antinomianism* was the claim and *license* was the label. But the cries came not from the Roman Church; this time they came from Protestant church leaders who were the product of the sixteenth-century Reformation.<sup>26</sup> Unlike the Reformer's earlier response when the Roman Church charged the Reformers with antinomianism, the Free Grace camp did not deflect that charge. Rather, they explained the logic of their view from a correct interpretation of Ephesians 2, Romans 4, and James 2, in which they *distinguished relationship from fellowship*.<sup>27</sup>



## MYTH 1: Christian Life Views Are Similar

Like the Arminian approach, the Free Grace view makes a clear distinction between coming to faith (justification) and walking by faith (sanctification). After that initial act of faith, one is to walk by faith or in good works in the Christian life. Coming to faith establishes a relationship with Christ; walking by faith involves fellowship with Christ. No amount or any type of meritorious works by man is a prerequisite for initial salvation, and none is required to keep one saved. While agreeing that the Christian life is lived in cooperation between God and man, the Free Grace position differs from the Arminian view in that good works do not keep one saved. Once saved by faith alone in the sufficiency of Christ alone,<sup>28</sup> fellowship with Christ is a lifelong journey of good works. Rather than ensuring a relationship with God, good works are actually the proof of a growing intimate fellowship with Christ.

Unlike the Reformed approach, which rejects crediting good works to the believer, the Free Grace position understands believer's good works in sanctification to be the actual meritorious works of the believer. In obedience to numerous scriptural commands, believers are to walk in conformity to the Word of God. At Christ's return, those works will be evaluated, not to see if one is saved, but to give rewards for faithful service for Christ (2 Cor. 5:10).<sup>29</sup>

### Spiritual Ben-and-Jerry's

In the first three positions works are essential for salvation. Either a person needs works to be saved, or if he does not have works, then he proves he never was saved or is not saved now, even though he once was. *The supposed need for somehow working one's way to heaven is stated or implied in each of these three approaches, and that issue concerns assurance of salvation.* However in the Free Grace approach works are not a means of obtaining, proving, or sustaining salvation; rather, salvation is received simply and freely by faith alone, completely in the sufficiency of Jesus Christ alone. While coming to Christ for salvation is free by faith alone, walking with

## FREE TO CHOOSE

Christ in increased intimacy has a price.<sup>30</sup> Salvation is free at Christ's expense, but following Him is the believer's responsibility.

### Flavor Really Matters

My neighbor down the street develops ice-cream flavors for a major ice-cream supplier. If anyone suggests that the flavor does not matter, he would inform him otherwise. People are partial to particular flavors. Similarly individuals have preferences in choosing a particular local church. They are concerned about the size of the congregation, the nursery, the youth programs, the music, and the

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preaching style. These may be of some importance, but of far greater significance is the church's position on salvation (receiving eternal life) and sanctification (living the Christian life).

Why are we not concerned when the plan of salvation is incorrectly presented within the "Christian" community? If we order peppermint ice cream but are served mocha ice cream, we are irritated. Or if we are allergic to chocolate, we are repulsed when offered chocolate-chip ice cream. But we do not seem concerned at all when some heretical teaching on salvation is served up on a spiritual platter. The billboard discussed earlier was an obvious display of the many false paths to God. Why do we not discern false paths to God in the "Christian" community? Some respond by saying, "It's all basically the same, just different words. It's a matter of semantics. That's all." Not so! This is a question of heaven or hell and a matter of intimate fellowship with God. Biblically entrance into heaven is based on faith alone in the sufficiency of Christ alone, plus nothing. Fellowship with Christ

## MYTH 1: *Christian Life Views Are Similar*

is by means of a faithful walk of obedience. Never does the Bible merge initial salvation and fellowship together.

TRUTH  
CHRISTIAN LIFE VIEWS DIFFER

## FREE TO CHOOSE

### Myth 1, NOTES

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1. Alan Schreck, *Catholic & Christian* (Cincinnati: Servant, 1984), 23-24; and R. C. Sproul, *Faith Alone* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 149.
2. Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago: Moody, 1989), 527.
3. Schreck, *Catholic & Christian*, 37.
4. Sproul, *Faith Alone*, 149.
5. Schreck, *Catholic & Christian*, 111.
6. R. C. Sproul, *Grace Unknown* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 66.
7. *Ibid.*, 181.
8. Sproul, *Faith Alone*, 151.

John MacArthur concurs when he writes, “If God’s purposes were dependent on some self-generated response of faith or on human merit, then God Himself would not be sovereign, and salvation would not be wholly His work” (John F. MacArthur, *Faith Works* [Dallas: Word, 1993], 62).
9. Sproul, *Grace Unknown*, 149.
10. Anthony A. Hoekema, “Reformed Perspective,” in *Five Views on Sanctification*, ed. Melvin E. Dieter (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 62.
11. MacArthur, *Faith Works*, 70 (italics his).

Each believer will be rewarded “according to what he has done” at the judgment seat of Christ (2 Cor. 5:10).

R. C. Sproul unsatisfactorily tries to address this seemingly dilemma in Reformed theology when he says, “The Reformers understood this [rewards distributed according to our works] to mean that, though God distributes rewards according to our works, it remains a gracious distribution and is based on no merit inhering in them” (Sproul, *Faith Alone*, 148).

Jody Dillow reveals the difficulty Reformed theology has in explaining their rewards-and-merit position (Joseph C. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings* [Hayesville, NC: Schoettle, 1992], 526-28).

## MYTH 1: Christian Life Views Are Similar

12. John Murray, *Redemption—Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 148-49 (italics his).

Also Anthony Hoekema says that sanctification is not a matter of non-cooperation between God and man. “How, then, shall we describe the relationship between God’s working and our working? Should we say, as some have done, that sanctification is a work of God in which believers cooperate? This way of stating the doctrine, however, wrongly implies that God and we each do part of the work of sanctification” (Hoekema, “Reformed Perspective,” 71.).

13. Sproul, *Faith Alone*, 149.

While God causes good works, Anthony Hoekema states that the believer is not passive in the activity. “Sanctification is not a human activity but a divine gift....According to Scripture, therefore, though sanctification is primarily God’s work in us, it is not a process in which we remain passive but one in which we must be continually active” (Hoekema, “Reformed Perspective,” 70-71.).

Obviously activity does not mean meritorious works for Reformed theology. Therefore, the believer is only a passive conduit for God’s activity through him. A picture of a hand puppet comes to mind.

14. Melvin E. Dieter, “Wesleyan Perspective,” in *Five Views on Sanctification*, 19.

15. Ibid.

16. Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, 500.

17. John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Carlisle, PA; Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 2:183-84.

Reformers make a distinction between regeneration (the work of God) and conversion (the faith of man in God), stating that they do not occur simultaneously. A person must be regenerated before he can believe.

18. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, 265.

19. Dieter, “Wesleyan Perspective,” 20.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, 499.

23. Ibid., 500.

## FREE TO CHOOSE

24. Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), 3:371-93; Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Balancing the Christian Life* (Chicago: Moody, 1969), 169-81; Zane Clark Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege* (Dallas: Redencion Viva, 1982), 3-18; Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, 271-91; and Earl D. Radmacher, *Salvation* (Nashville: Word, 2000), 113-28.
25. Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, 340.

Enns explains, “Regeneration is an act of God, not a cooperative effort between God and man. That is not to say, however, that faith is unnecessary in salvation. It may be suggested that although regeneration and faith are distinct, they occur simultaneously.”
26. Sproul, *Faith Alone*, 25, 169, 171; and MacArthur, *Faith Works*, 94-96.
27. See *Myth 5: Good Works Are a Proof of Salvation*, 79-93.
28. Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, 500.

Enns comments in this way on the believer’s eternal possession of life in Christ: “The clear emphasis of Scripture, however, is that the believer has eternal life as a present possession (John 3:16; 1 John 5:11-13) and is kept secure by Christ (John 10:28) because of what He has done (Rom. 5:1; 8:1).”
29. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, 520-26.
30. Following Christ in discipleship is costly, but discipleship should not be confused with initial salvation, which is by faith alone. See *Myth 12: Co-Payments Required* (Ken Neff, *Hold Fast* [St. Augustine, FL: LQ Press, 2010], 153-62).