

## **Principles for Living as a Free Grace Christian**

By Tim Nichols

We are surrounded by Christians with whom we disagree widely on various matters of doctrine and practice, especially as it applies to the grace of God. It's easy to begin feeling lonely, cranky, even superior. How should we approach the world around us?

In what follows, I propose a general stance toward life that I believe is required by our understanding of Christ and His grace. I then propose some particular applications in our dealings with other Christians. I will close by "putting feet to it," telling some stories from my own life and ministry.

### **General Principles**

- Tangibly love your literal neighbors. Jesus said to. Also, it turns out that a friend near at hand is better than a brother far away. Invest more in the church down the street than you invest in a like-minded church in another state.
- Begin from a stance of blessing. Bless what can be blessed, and then work on the rest. Correction is sometimes required, but among theologically conservative evangelicals, it's a greatly overrated tool. Don't be cranky. You know that guy who's a Calvinist, and he's kinda mad about it? Don't be the FG version of that guy.
- Reserve the Minor Prophets treatment for the unpersuadable. There's a place for mockery, but other tools first.
- Understand the difference between argument and persuasion. Having superior arguments is not the same thing as being persuasive. By all means, have superior arguments, but don't expect them to do your persuasive work for you. Ethical persuasion is founded on sound arguments—that's what separates us from the sophists and the propagandists—but persuasion is still a whole separate discipline. Accept that, and do the extra work to be persuasive as well as right.
- Distinguish between theology and ideology. Ideology is a system of beliefs in your head (in the Christian community, what we often call doctrine or theology.) Theology—real theology—is knowledge of God, and biblically speaking knowledge is always relational, never just propositional. Theology isn't something you acquire from reading fat books; it's something you attain by walking with God. (At best, reading the books helps you to gain insight, but insight is not change. You still have to live it.) You can productively share only what you've attained, to the degree that you've attained it. Your ideology isn't worth much; your knowledge of God is worth a lot.
- Never forget what the Bible is actually for. Revelation is given to help us know God. It is inspired and inerrant and you should love God well enough to pay very careful attention to it, but if the fruit of your careful attention is an excruciatingly correct system of doctrine while your heart is far from Him, you're just a good Pharisee. Meanwhile, your flaming Arminian brother in Christ who has walked closely with God these past 40 years is using his Bible better than you are using yours, despite his many exegetical and doctrinal sins.

I'd rather see one of my disciples turn into that Arminian Christ-follower than a Free Grace Pharisee—and so should you.

- The unity of Christ's Body is a cardinal doctrine and practice, essential to maintaining clarity on justification by faith (as Paul said in Galatians), and a crucial part of our witness to the world, not to mention being Jesus' dying wish for His people (Jn. 17). Our real convictions on unity are demonstrated in our choices of whom to eat with, pray with, worship with, and work with. If we don't do those things outside the narrow confines of our home community, we might think unity is permissible, but we don't think it's important. In consequence, we are muddling the gospel before a watching world.
- Jesus is not afraid to cut branches off the family tree, and He does not keep branches alive for no reason. Every part of the Body has something to contribute. Assume the people you meet have something to teach you. The ones you think have nothing to teach you? They might just be sitting on something you're not ready to hear yet.
- Discipleship is our job. The one time Jesus said anything about building the church, He said He'd do it. He commissioned us to make disciples. If we do that well, there will be churches (and if we do it like Paul, they'll come pretty quickly, although they won't necessarily look like what a "church" is expected to be in the Western world). On the other hand, it's only too possible to build a church without making a single disciple.
- It's a long game; the Kingdom is like leaven hidden in three measures of meal. I'm not looking for instant results; I'm looking for lasting change over long periods of time. I can afford to be patient. (So about that Arminian Christ-follower: God's not done with him, and neither am I. One thing at a time....)

### **Notes on Being Free Grace**

Now as to being FG in a sea of, well, everything else...

- Forget that you're FG. Seriously. Stop acting like you're part of some suppressed minority. You're a Christian who has learned some things about God that some of your fellow believers do not yet know. That's all, and you're hardly the only one. Share as appropriate, which is to say, when it will serve them.
- Serve, serve, serve! Your project is not to lecture your fellow Christians into better exegesis and doctrine (being a former seminary professor, this lesson came hard to me). Your project is to actually help them with problems they actually have.
- Take a stance of blessing toward your fellow believers. We believe in grace, remember? So bless what can be blessed. Bless your local Catholics for caring for the poor through their food bank. Bless your local charismatics' passion for God. Bless your local Baptists' passion for evangelism. If they're doing a good thing, speak blessing over it in the name of Jesus. Learn all you can from them.
- Pray for and with your fellow believers. Be the person they can count on for encouragement when they're hurt, wounded, afraid, or just down.
- Exemplify grace. Love the broken. Restore the sinners. Forgive those who've hurt you and betrayed your trust. You can't win them over to a grace you don't exhibit.
- You exemplify grace by ministering to the people who are "too hot to handle" in your community, whether that's the Sunday school superintendent who got caught cheating

on his wife, the spooky lady who's a practicing witch, the homeless guy with the cardboard sign on the street corner, or the city manager that no one talks to unless they want something. Love the unloved; bless the isolated; engage those who scare you; hug people who stink. Be the Christian that makes other Christians shake their head and say, "How does he do that?" Then, when they ask—and they will—tell them.

- Never underestimate the persuasive power of a controlling metaphor drawn from Scripture. Dallas Willard, et al., tell people that God is a good Father who won't throw them away, and challenge them to trust the Father's love. That's done more for the state of assurance in the American church than all the painstaking FG exegesis of James 2 has ever done. Don't sneer at things like that; embrace them and use them. He who is not against us is with us, like the Man said.
- You will meet people who exemplify and teach FG theology better than the best FG person you know, but they're inconsistent. They're perfect in John 6, and then fall apart in James 2, that sort of thing—but they still live it better than any of us consciously FG people do. Treasure those folks; they're gonna teach you a lot. If you can get one to disciple you, do it. Grace lived unconsciously is better than grace affirmed in theory and denied in practice.
- When it's time to have a conversation about some aspect of FG theology, deal in specific passages as much as you can. Most interpretive traditions tend to be weak on specifics, preferring to thrive on a big-picture synthesis that seems to work with the passages at hand as long as nobody looks too closely. Look closely.
- Address problem passages as they come up in real life. When someone is struggling in their life, and James 2 has the answer, *that* is the time to teach them a correct interpretation of James 2.
- Avoid trying to take down a system/ideology (Reformed, Roman Catholic, Arminian, whatever). People are afraid to let go of their system and trust the Bible, so don't get into a credibility contest with the system. If the system needs to go, you can let it collapse of its own weight as they realize that passage after passage just doesn't support the big-picture synthesis. (Occasionally, you really will have to take on the whole system at once, but it's worth avoiding if you can avoid it.)
- If you must take down a system, try to crystallize the issue into a single passage or a single practical question. Sharpen the contradiction between the system and the Scriptures as much as you possibly can, and then let them suffer while they work it out. Allow no sloppy thinking. Ask lots of questions.
- "I understand what you're saying, but do you really find that explanation convincing?" is a particularly good question. It's amazing how often we scramble to save the system with some flimsy explanation, and never stop to think if the explanation is actually any good.
- By the way, if you do the above, they will return the favor (at least, the ones that are still talking to you will). It will be hard to take, but good for you. When they catch you mouthing some lame explanation to save your system—and they will, never fear—repent instantly. Eat a generous portion of humble pie, and go back to the drawing board. You respond this way first of all because you owe it to God to hunger and thirst for truth and righteousness. Secondly, you're setting an example for them to live up to.

- Disciple, disciple, disciple! And do it with careful reading of passages of Scripture. Teach a passage that says what the person needs for their discipleship right now. Help them live the correct interpretation.

### **What It Looks Like In Practice**

Principles are great, but only when they're embodied in practice. Let me tell you some real-life stories, because that's where the good stuff is.

The pastors in Englewood get together once a month to pray together. We each briefly share how things are with God, with our families, and with our ministries, and then we lift each other up in prayer—for real. We go to war on each other's behalf, and it's awesome. Through the twists and turns of my ministry these last 8 years, these guys have supported me, blessed me, and fought for me, and I for them. My business partner Joe and I are the only FG guys in the group, although a couple of the other guys are close. (One of our Assemblies of God ministers, for example, gave the best FG, eternal security sermon on John 15 that I've ever heard. Go figure.) We participate in this, up to the hilt. A while back, the pastor that's been leading the group needed to offload some responsibilities, and asked Joe to step in and lead. So for the last year, our pastors' prayer group has been led by a FG pastor. We're leading the charge to once again do joint worship services in our city. (We had one for several years, and it's time to bring it back.)

When Joe and I started Headwaters (our publishing company and local ministry nonprofit), our board members were drawn from the ranks of the local pastors. There are five board members total, the two of us and three local pastors, none of whom are FG. They know us and believe in our work (because they've seen it up close), and we trust them. And honestly, they've treated us a lot better than most of the FG folks we know. Holding out for FG people on our board would have been a serious mistake; it was much more important to have solid Christian leaders who see us regularly. "Better a friend nearby than a brother far away" applies to your doctrinal "family" too.

Another set of examples. A while back, a local church hired me as an associate pastor for discipleship. Then after two years' service, the elders "eliminated my position" in an uncharacteristically hasty way. It took everyone by surprise, me included, and it seemed a little hinky at the time. At the time I was told the standard line about the Lord's leading for the direction of the church; the truth was rather less savory, and involved personal betrayal by someone I trusted, a bucket-load of slander from that person to various parties including other staff and the elders, and a substantial lack of due diligence by various responsible parties. Throughout the aftermath, I stayed present in the lives of the guilty and complicit parties, and seven months later, the elders and I were able to reconcile. Over time, and in God's good providence, the lies and liars have mostly been exposed, the truth has mostly been told. All is forgiven, and those who are still present, myself included, are all friends. (Two of the people concerned literally left the state, and although all is forgiven, there's been no real opportunity for full restoration with them yet. But God is patient.) Today, at that same church that once wouldn't have me as their pastor of discipleship, I quietly disciple key staff members, and support them in

ministry. My present pastoral work requires me to spend a certain number of Sundays at other local churches or working with the spiritual community, but that church remains my home base. I taught their lead pastor key elements of a FG reading of James when he was teaching through the book—something I could only do because I’ve been supporting him for years. When someone spread a series of vicious slanders about the worship pastor, I walked her through living out “blessed are you when they say all kinds of evil against you falsely.” (There’s a spiritual discipline of celebration here; Jesus says to rejoice and be exceedingly glad. You go out, buy a bottle of good wine, and have some friends over to lift a glass with you. Yes, seriously. Read Psalm 104—that’s what wine is for. Celebrate.) We also spent some time with “I fill up in my flesh what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ for the sake of His body,” which sounds downright blasphemous until you’re in a position to apply it. Then it makes all manner of sense. I had the authority to call her into hard obedience, because she’d seen me do it myself, with her own church leadership.

That’s the kind of thing I mean when I say “exemplify grace” and “serve.”  
Hope this helps.

Blessings,  
Tim Nichols  
Twelfth Night, 2018  
(rev. 2019)