

A FG Umbrella

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Introduction

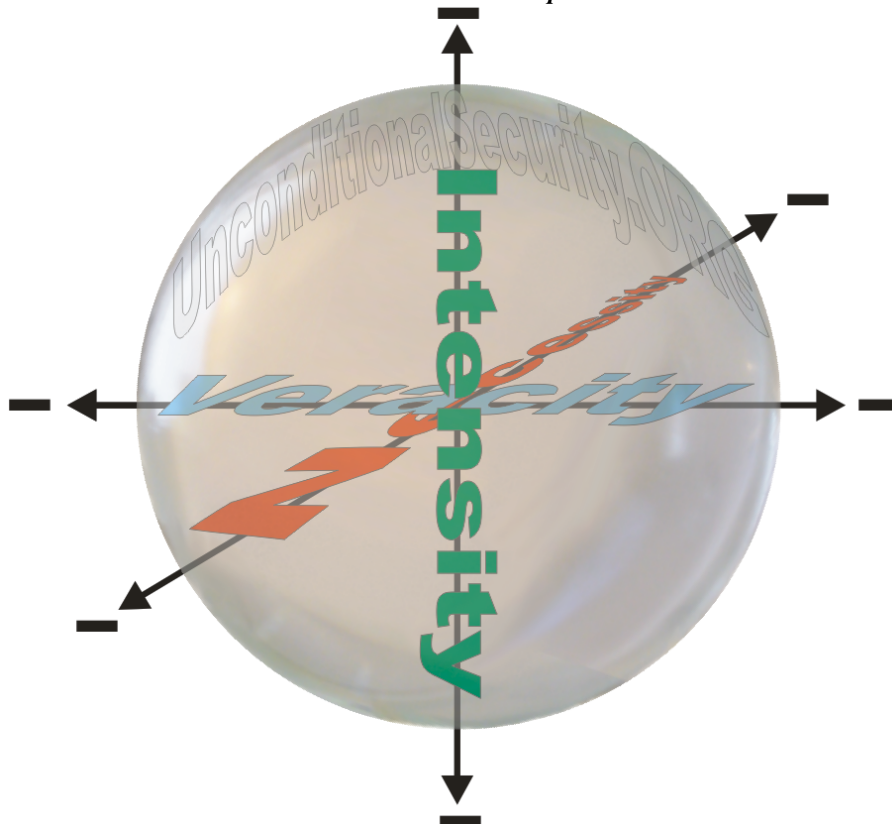
Within the Free Grace (FG) community, the logical necessity of adhering to a minimum and maximum range of values has been prudently noted.¹ An anything-goes perspective cannot be advocated. If we fall for anything, we will stand for nothing. Such discussions sometimes appear to be rather one dimensional, though, focusing on the core essentials for saving faith with the simple question: “What is the *least* and *most* one *must* and *may* believe, respectively, at the point of conversion, and still be said to have experienced saving faith?” Such an elementary question, although useful, probably fails to accomplish the true objective, nonetheless, of answering the intended question: “Who belongs to the FG community?”

Illustration 1. FG Umbrella



Expressed one dimensionally, this more comprehensive question may be reworded as: “Who belongs under the FG umbrella?” Yet does not the imagery of an umbrella suggest more than one axis needs to be considered? If someone else is holding the umbrella, then, in addition to not being too tall or too short, one must also stay under the umbrella in order to be protected by the umbrella. Likewise, concerns along the vertical axis must be met with similar considerations regarding the horizontal dimensions. A three-dimensional discussion of the question, “Who belongs under the FG umbrella?” would better account for the various matters under contemplation.

Illustration 2. FG Sphere



Because a range of values along three axes would be more descriptive of FG theology than trying to limit oneself to a 1D perspective, a 3D sphere encompassing the acceptable values and excluding unacceptable values along each of the 3D axes would better picture the situation. Each of the three axes has extreme negative dimensions in both directions that would exclude those holding those positions from falling within the sphere of FG theology.

Veracity

Veracity is the primary axes. “Is unconditional security true?” is the focus of this discussion. “What constitutes unconditional security?” is a necessary consideration as well. Contrary to the opinion of some in FG, yet depending upon one’s definitions, both strong and soft Calvinists should be excluded from inclusion within the FG sphere. Unconditional election cannot be equated with unconditional security. A security conditioned upon perseverance cannot be rightly called unconditional.

Maximum

Accordingly, some within the FG arena would seek to exclude those writers in the FG camp who insist that preservation in the faith is necessary to reach heaven. In counterpoint, notwithstanding my disagreement with the preservationist point of view, I would allow that those FG writers who merely affirm the preservation of the believer’s faith as a soteriological necessity should not be excluded from the FG fellowship. Preservation should not be equated with perseverance. Preservationists, at least of the consistent FG variety, do not condition security upon a believer’s performance (not even upon the believer’s perseverance in the faith) and hence should be allowed under the FG umbrella.

On the other hand, some writers who try to pass themselves off as proponents of FG theology frontload the gospel with either repentance or commitment as necessary components of saving faith. By posing one versus the other as soteriological necessary, they seek to present themselves as advocates of FG theology. In reality, they are wolves in FG clothing and must be excluded from the protective sphere of FG theology. The maximum range along the veracity-axis should not be expanded to accommodate their perspective. This maximum range must exclude frontloading the gospel with performance (by means of commitment or repentance) and prohibit backloading the gospel (by means of perseverance in faithfulness or perseverance in faith). Closing to door to one false form of the gospel while opening it to another will not suffice. The FG door must be shut to all forms of the gospel that would seek to incorporate good works as a necessary means of entering heaven.

Minimum

In a similar fashion, the necessity of minimum FG values in the comprehensive approach is attested by the necessary exclusion of some who would affirm unconditional security and yet be excluded from the FG community. The universalist, for example, would allow that everyone who believes in Christ is unconditionally secure. Moreover, the evangelical inclusivist, who believes in Christ for eternal life, might be said to qualify for eternal life (even in FG terms). Notwithstanding, neither a universalist nor an evangelical inclusivist would not be regarded as belonging to the FG camp.

Illustration 3. Inclusivism

All religions lead to heaven.



Illustration 4. Evangelical Exclusivism

Only the Christian religion leads to heaven.

All other religions lead to hell.



Illustration 5. Evangelical Inclusivism

All religions lead to heaven through Jesus



Illustration 6. Biblical Exclusivism

All religions lead to hell.

Only a relationship with Jesus leads to heaven.



Even though some evangelical inclusivists might affirm unconditional security (and thus qualify for such life on FG terms), they would be excluded from the FG ranks. Calling such an evangelical a *FG inclusivist* would be a misnomer. Biblical exclusivism is the more appropriate representation of what is embraced in the FG community. At its heart, FG theology is an affirmation of unconditional security. Yet such security is reserved for those who have believed explicitly in Christ.

Necessity

Necessity is the second most important axis. “Does one necessarily have to believe, at least implicitly, in unconditional security at the point of conversion in order to qualify for saving faith?” Some in the FG community, while they affirm the veracity of unconditional security, do not think that belief in unconditional security is necessary for faith to be saving. Strangely, according to ultra-soft FG securitists, the same accursed gospel that separates believers from Christ can bring unbelievers to Christ (Gal 1:6-9; 5:4).² Texts such as Jn 20:31 and 1Jn 5:1 are thought to prove that all that is soteriologically necessary is that one believes that *Jesus is the Christ (the Son of God)*. Those who believe that proposition are thought to be unconditionally secure even if they reject unconditional security.³

Evidently, from the ultra-soft perspective, even if one believes that *Jesus is the Christ* (in the sense of giving a bag of marbles to those who believe in Him), one still qualifies for eternal life. One can believe in Christ for a bag of marbles and get eternal life as a result. Those of us in the FG community who reject this proposal wonder if our FG brethren who hold this ultra-soft perspective have lost their marbles. Nevertheless, charity should caution us against disavowing these ultra-soft securitists as FG brethren. Perhaps ultra-soft securitists have gone soft in the head, in thinking that *faith alone in Christ alone* qualifies for unconditional security even if that *faith is not alone nor in Christ alone*. Even so, although these ultra-soft securitists think that a soteriologically accursed gospel qualifies as a saving gospel, these FG brethren do not believe an accursed gospel themselves and thus are not soteriologically accursed. As a result, the minimum range should include these ultra-soft securitists.⁴

At this juncture, the discussion tends to become very heated. Ultra-soft conditionalists need a minimum value of some sort. Since they cannot take belief in unconditional security as their minimum value, they focus on Christology as their means of finding a minimum value for their soteriology. After all, their premise regarding Jn 20:31 and 1Jn 5:1 seemingly points them in this direction. Various propositions about Christ, especially His deity, are set forth as what they hold to be the minimum values that one must believe in order to qualify for saving faith. Unfortunately, some of those adopting this Christological approach to finding a minimum value have ostracized their FG brethren who, as strong securitists, hold an equally high view of Christology and yet find their minimum values elsewhere, namely in affirming the necessity of faith in Christ as the bestower of unconditional security. Regardless, both sets of securitists should be included in the FG sphere.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, those securitists focusing on an all-embracing Christology sometimes make such a long list of Christological requirements as to what one must believe about Christ that they risk exceeding the maximum values that can be assigned to Christ without leaving the sphere of FG theology. Making a virtue out of a list runs the risk of conditioning salvation from hell upon one's virtue. At the very least, be wary of making such lists lest one become weary of the numerous subjective variations that arise among the various list holders.

Minimally, those in the FG community are agreed as to the necessity of security in terms of its veracity. Maximally, strong FG securitists contend that faith in Christ as the bestower of unconditional security is necessary for saving faith to occur. Although this faith must be explicitly in Christ, the faith in unconditional security may be implicit. A full, robust understanding of unconditional security is not necessary for saving faith to have occurred. Moreover, believing in unconditional security as necessary is itself not necessary for inclusion within the FG community. Soft securitists who affirm unconditional security and yet do not regard faith in unconditional security to be soteriological necessary are genuinely found within the FG sphere.

Intensity

Intensity is the last and least axis to be considered in the present study. As a misthologist, I am tempted to regard those in FG who hold an exclusively soteriological view of the outer darkness as teaching an accursed gospel because their approach has a pronounced propensity, particularly pertaining to the third passage in question (Mt 25:14-30), to lend itself to teaching that one must *serve well or burn in hell*. To teach unconditional security, in such a manner, would be grounds for dismissal from the FG arena. Nonetheless, considering the fact that some very good defenders of unconditional security hold to an exclusively soteriological view of the outer darkness, attributing their interpretation of the outer darkness to exegetical inconsistency is to be preferred over excluding them as being incompatible with FG theology. The minimum value along this

reward axis, then, must be sought elsewhere.

Even those FG writers who hold a mistaken view of the outer darkness have sufficiently affirmed the biblical doctrine of rewards in other ways so as to fall under the FG umbrella. Therefore, the minimum value along this misthological axis would be found in an affirmation of rewards that clearly distinguishes entrance into heaven from rewards in heaven, even if these rewards are mistakenly thought to last only for a millennium. Although, comparatively speaking, the writings of those FG brethren who mistake the outer darkness as dealing exclusively with soteriology will tend to be rather weak in their misthology, they still retain enough FG misthology so as not to fall into an accursed performatistic soteriology.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, however, some in the FG camp teach too strong a doctrine of rewards in the form of kingdom exclusion or metaphysical Gehenna inclusion. Still, they properly regard entrance into the eternal kingdom as a free gift, affirm unconditional security, and distinguish the free gift of eternal life from misthological dimensions of that life. Therefore, they should not to be excluded from the FG fellowship since they do not make entrance into the eternal kingdom a reward. The maximum range for this axis would be found elsewhere, namely in rightly excluding those writers who make entrance into heaven a reward. Such writers properly are excluded from the FG sphere since they teach conditional security.

¹ Arch Rutherford, "An Open Letter to the Free Grace Community," *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal* 12:2 (Fall 2006): 2-7. *Maximum* is used herein for what Rutherford describes as the *bare maximum* to limit those items that may be included.

² Taking these Galatian texts as our lead for present purposes, a soteriologically *accursed gospel* will be defined as a *gospel separates the person who believes it from Christ*. Such a gospel is so soteriological defective that it severs believers from Christ (temporally and misthologically) and fails to bring unbelievers to Christ (soteriologically). In the Galatian context, seeking final soteric justification by means of performance is an accursed gospel. By it, the regenerate are separated from Christ temporally and misthologically, and the unregenerate remain separated from Christ soteriologically. This definition and explanation purposefully exclude the ultra-soft perspective as dealing adequately with the Galatian context.

³ The references to strong and soft Calvinists as well as to soft and strong securitists must be understood in the sense in which they are intended in my forthcoming book, *3D Unconditional Security*, of which the present article will serve as one of the appendixes.

⁴ The counterargument could be raised that just as so-called *FG inclusivists* are excluded from the FG sphere along the veracity-axis so these ultra-soft securitists are in reality nothing more than *FG inclusivists* along the necessity-axis and should be excluded as well. As attractive as the logical symmetry of that argument may be, it does not correspond to the historical reality in which the FG moment currently finds itself. At present, some of the best defenders of FG theology hold an ultra-soft view of the necessity of unconditional security. Consequently, for now at least, the present writer will allow an asymmetrical relationship regarding inclusivity between the two axes in order to correspond to the reality of the situation as it stands at present.