

**Orthodoxy, Character, Wisdom, and Witness:
An Open Letter to the Free Grace Community**
by Timothy R. Nichols

There has been much debate within the Free Grace community recently about *exactly* what a person needs to believe in order to be eternally saved. Having effectively silenced us in the wider evangelical community, Satan seems to be seeking to divide and conquer us from within. And to our considerable disgrace, it's working rather well.

We have doctrinal orthodoxy. All of us. We agree with one another about the death and resurrection of Christ, and the implications of that. We agree that we should share these things with the unbeliever. We disagree about what should be said first, what second, and what third. But when we talk to an unbeliever, the statements we make will all be true.

What we lack, it would seem, is Christian character and Christian wisdom. We lack the wisdom to learn from the lives of those who have gone before us. Church history clearly shows us that controversies involving the development of highly nuanced doctrinal statements take time—a lot of time—before the positions stabilize. We're talking decades here, not months. The pattern certainly holds true in this discussion; most of the combatants are not saying the same things, in the same ways, that they did even a year ago. Yet we have impatiently and unwisely politicized the issue. In our rush to judgment, we have forced institutional divisions while nearly everyone's position is still developing. We lack the character to be patient with each other. **We lack the character to address long-standing relational sins that disrupt our fellowship; we prefer to divide over the first convenient doctrinal issue that comes along rather than addressing the issues that really divide us.** We lack the character to find a practical solution that allows us to continue working together until we can come to agreement—such a solution *is* available to us, as my continued partnerships with people on both sides demonstrates. Could it be that we don't accept a solution because we don't *want* one? We seem ready to play the hero that banished the heretics from among us, but are we ready to bear the cost of winning our brothers to the truth through a wisdom that is “first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy”? Is the mind which was in Christ Jesus in evidence among us?

Church history also shows us that in serious controversies, *everyone* is wrong about something; *nobody* is saying *all* the right things in *all* the right ways. The beauty of the Body of Christ is that by fellowshipping together around the Word of God, we can complement each other's weaknesses and collectively come to a greater understanding than any of us could have obtained working alone. The tragedy is that we so seldom do. This is not just

something to shake our heads over, as though fellowship were theoretically desirable, but impossible in real life. Nothing but our own sin and hard-heartedness prevents us from fellowshiping with God and with each other. “If we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin.” We have contented ourselves with institutional factions as though they were necessary, instead of abhorring them for what they are—a sign of persistent sin preventing the fellowship to which we are called. *This is walking in darkness; this is a moral failure.* We sin who do it, we sin who condone it, and we sin who fail to confront it. And there are precious few among us who are not guilty.

I would like to say that I am not guilty. I can’t. Oh, I’ve done some things right. Even while I was doing them, I hypocritically contributed my share of unnecessary and idle sarcastic remarks along the way. On occasion, I have given needless offense to a brother over this issue. I might have told myself at the time that it was merely a mistake, but it was more than that. It was a violation of the commands to love God above all and to love my neighbor as myself. Rationalizing it was just covering my pride, self-seeking, and selfishness. “He who covers his sins will not prosper; but whoever confesses and forsakes them shall have mercy.” I am deeply ashamed. Brothers, I repent, and I invite you to join me.

I have some things to say about the doctrinal issue, and I hope to say them in a forthcoming article. I don’t believe it’s just semantics. I do think it is important. I hope to do my part to move us another step closer to doctrinal unity. But first things first. **It is folly to expect the Word and the Spirit to produce doctrinal unity among us while we are walking in darkness.** How will we hear them? And as long as we permit ourselves to be unrighteous in the way we carry out the discussion, make no mistake, we are walking in darkness.

We have excused our tolerance for disunity on the grounds that Christian unity is based on sound doctrine; therefore, we tell ourselves, since the disagreement is doctrinal, there is no unity. But no. In my observation, much of the heat in this fight has been generated by unrighteous conduct; the real consequences of the doctrinal difference are relatively minor by comparison with the consequences of the other sins involved.

As far as the doctrine is concerned, our passion for leading unbelievers to Christ is what makes this debate so critical to us. We have been so busy fighting about what we say to the unbeliever that we have neglected another crucial element in our witness, the element that Francis Schaeffer called “the final apologetic.” As Jesus put it:

*I do not pray for these alone, but also for all those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, **that the world may believe that You sent Me.** And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and **that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as you have loved Me.***

The sooner we surrender our willful self-deception, the sooner we humble ourselves before the Lord and each other, the sooner we let the mind which was in Christ Jesus also be in us, the sooner we will have unity again. **And according to Jesus, unity is part of our witness too.**

Timothy R. Nichols received his most significant biblical education from his father, Rev. Edd Nichols, and his mother, Kayleen. He went on to study at Florida Bible College and received his B.S. from Southeastern Bible College. Tim received his Th.M. from CTS in 2004 and is an instructor in the Greek and Theology departments at CTS. He also pastors a church in Hemet, California. His email address is tnich77@yahoo.com.