

A dramatic scene with a beam of light shining down from the top left corner onto an open book lying flat on a dark surface. The light creates a strong contrast, highlighting the pages of the book and the text. The background is dark, making the light and the book stand out.

Getting  
the  
Gospel  
More Right

## Getting the Gospel *More* Right

### Introduction

R.C. Sproul's *Getting the Gospel Right* (Baker Books, 2017) examined whether attempts at unity between Roman Catholics and some Protestants were biblically legitimate. His conclusion was firm: if *Sola Fide* (faith alone) is essential to the gospel, and Rome denies *Sola Fide*, then Rome denies the gospel itself and cannot be regarded as a true church. Unity, therefore, is impossible where the gospel is denied.

Sproul's reasoning is sound. Yet it exposes a question he never fully faced: if denial of one *Sola* destroys the gospel, what of Protestants who deny another? If *Sola Fide* is indispensable, is *Sola Gratia* (grace alone) any less so? This essay applies Sproul's logic within Protestantism itself and argues that the same principle that excludes Rome's gospel also exposes the fatal inconsistency within modern Evangelicalism's "free will" soteriology.

### The Transferable Principle: Unity Requires Truth

Sproul rightly observed that many shared beliefs between Rome and Protestants: the Trinity, the deity of Christ, His death and resurrection, cannot compensate for disagreement over justification by faith alone. *Essential error cannot coexist with essential truth*. If this principle holds for Rome, it must also hold within Protestantism.

Within Evangelicalism, two systems contend for the gospel's definition:

1. **Free-Will Salvation (FWS):** God makes salvation *possible* for all, but it becomes *actual* only for those who choose to believe. Grace is necessary but not sufficient. For the sinner's decision is decisive.
2. **Sovereign Grace (SG):** God elects, redeems, and regenerates His people by grace alone. Faith and repentance are gifts produced by that grace, not prerequisites to it.

Both groups confess the same Christ, cross, and resurrection per the historic Creeds. Yet they diverge on the decisive question: *Who makes salvation effective?* If Sproul's principle is transferable, then this question is not secondary: it is *essential*.

## Grace: *More Than Unmerited Favour*

Evangelical theology often defines grace narrowly as “undeserved kindness.” Scripture, however, presents a dual meaning: grace as both unmerited favour *and* divine enabling. It is not only God’s disposition but also His operative power and presence. Failure to understand this results in a substantially hollow understanding of salvation by grace alone, to the point of being a subtle denial of it.

Acts 18:27 summarizes this truth simply: “*He greatly helped those who by grace believed.*” Luke does not say they believed *about* grace as in the content of grace. But they believed it *by* grace. Grace is not the background of faith; it is its *cause*. Paul echoes the same in 1 Corinthians 15:10 “*I worked harder than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.*” While a disposition of unmerited favour from God cannot “work harder” in one than another to whom the same disposition is directed, grace *as divine enabling* can and does so work! It produces faith, perseverance, effort and obedience.

Ephesians 2:8–9 unites both texts: “*By grace you are saved through faith - and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God.*” The whole package, therefore, of grace, faith and salvation is the divine gift. To claim that faith originates in self is to reintroduce boasting where Paul forbids it: “*So that no flesh should glory in His presence.*” (1 Cor. 1:29). The only part of the equation that any could naturally assume was “of yourselves” would be faith. And that is precisely the error Paul corrects. Ephesians 2:5 – “By grace you are saved” is the shortest statement on the *how* of salvation in the New Testament. Concerning how, it is theologically complete. Meaning, there is no element specific to the how of salvation, that is not inherent in the statement.

- ✚ Eph. 2:8-9 is merely an expanded explanation of the shorter yet **theologically complete statement** in vs. 5 – “By grace are you saved.” Verses 8-9 do not introduce any idea, nor condition not *already inherent in verse 5*. This is often missed.

## The Denial of the Sola

Sproul correctly showed that Rome affirms grace, faith, and Christ as *necessary* but denies their *sufficiency*. In practice, the same is true of all Protestant FWS theology, though in more subtle ways. FWS theology teaches that grace assists the sinner but does not guarantee salvation. The specific type of assistance provided by grace is not clearly defined, although proponents of FWS maintain that it does not ensure a particular outcome. However, scriptural passages such as Eze. 36:24-25, Jer. 24:7, Ps.

86:11, Ps. 51:10-12, 1 Cor. 15:10, 1 Tim. 1:14-15, Acts 16:14, and Matt 16:17 clearly demonstrate various perspectives on the nature *and effects* of grace. The use of phrases like “We are not robots” is frequently employed by FWS advocates in discussions about how grace influences the understanding and choices of individuals. By this conclusion - that grace “assists” but does not ensure salvation, the *same* practical conclusion as Rome’s emerges, though not as overtly as Rome’s. In both views therefore, the “bottom line” comes into clear focus: Grace is necessary but not sufficient for salvation. In this anemic view, grace merely opens the door but leaves the final step to man. In doing so, it redacts grace from the efficient cause of faith into a cooperative offer dependent on human choice. Thus, the “Sola” is lost.

By contrast, SG theology maintains that *everything* required for salvation, even faith itself flows from God’s initiative and enabling. As Acts 16:14 declares, “*The Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul’s message.*” Grace alone both reveals and enables belief.

✚ To deny that grace is sufficient is to repeat Rome’s error in subtler form: **either grace completely saves, or it does not.**

The contrast could not be starker. A church might affirm the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds but still deny grace's sufficiency if it is viewed as even slightly partial. True fidelity to the gospel is not measured by the soundness of our formulas but **by the absence of our boasting**. Where grace alone reigns, Christ alone is exalted.

### **The *Inconsistency* of “Blessed Inconsistency”**

Sproul called FWS theology a “blessed inconsistency.” He believed that many within it are truly saved despite their theology, because God’s mercy overrules their error he thought. While pastorally gracious and a sentiment I whole-heartedly wish is true on an emotional level, the logic falters here. For if denying *Sola Fide* nullifies Rome’s gospel, denying *Sola Gratia* cannot be dismissed as a minor flaw. Both touch the same nerve: *the sufficiency of divine grace.*

Perhaps what Sproul meant is that Rome *openly* condemned “Sola Fide” and thereby rejected it. Whereas most if not all Protestant Evangelicals who are FWS in their Soteriology affirm it, at least “on paper”. Meaning, though they *claim* to affirm it and its corollary of “Sola Gratia”, in *actual practice*, as I will demonstrate below, they deny it. This is both an inconsistency and an actual contradiction. The former may be excused due to genuine ignorance resulting from either one’s assumptions or a far too superficial reading of scripture that falls woefully short of cross-referenced study. The

latter is far more serious. The meaning of inconsistency and contradiction are related and Thesaurus.com lists “inconsistency” as a synonym of contradiction. Synonyms for inconsistency are “deviation, incongruity, divergence.” For the sake of argument, I am content to allow the idea of “inconsistency” in the pastoral sense as described above. In the theological, doctrinal sense, I cannot and must not do so. This is primarily because the book of Galatians does not allow for such.

### **The Galatian Heresy: Subtle, not Overt but No Less Dangerous**

The “heresy” at Galatia being subtly woven into the truth of Sola Gratia upon which the church was founded was *subtle*, not overt. It lay not in the open denial of the need of Jesus’ death and resurrection nor the grace of God, but in the adding of something else to both: Moses, the Law, self-effort: Paul used all 3 terms interchangeably. For Paul the core issue was that *any addition* to Christ and grace alone is *really a subtraction*. It is there that Paul’s strongest condemnation and warnings lie.

The Galatians were not *knowingly* seeking to supplant Christ or His grace. Yet for Paul that was the net-result of the subtle error which was “bewitching” them, resulting in their slow but steady “falling from grace”. To fall *from* grace is to fall *to* something else in its place. For Paul, *any* mixture was leaven which was corrupting the whole. Any addition was really defection, even though unintended. The stakes now become very high.

**What begins as “inconsistency” that is the result of genuine ignorance, poor teaching and a lack of “thinking it through,” quickly transitions into rebellion after exposure to the truth of grace alone.** For this, Paul expressed a *zero-tolerance* rule (Gal. 1:6-9)

This does not mean every believer raised under FWS preaching is lost. Scripture distinguishes ignorance from rebellion. And this distinction *must* be maintained. God saves despite theological deficiency, not *because of it*. He also saves *from it* as the entire point of Galatians teaches. So, teachers and lay-persons who persist in denying the sufficiency of grace after exposure to Scripture’s testimony (Eph. 2:5, Acts 18:27, 1 Tim. 1:15) stand in grave danger of Paul’s warning: “*If anyone preaches another gospel... let him be accursed.*” (Gal. 1:8–9)

## Sola Gratia and Sola Fide: Inseparable

The five *Solas* of the Reformation are interdependent pillars upon which the gospel stands. Remove one and the structure collapses. *Sola Fide* rests on *Sola Gratia*; if faith itself is not a gift of grace, justification reverts to merit. *Sola Christus* depends on both, for if grace and faith are not sufficient, Christ's work is not either. *Soli Deo Gloria* perishes when man shares credit for his salvation.

Thus, to deny *Sola Gratia* is to deny the gospel in principle. Grace mixed with *self-effort* to any degree, ceases to be grace (Rom. 11:6). As surely as Rome fell for that snare, so does *any system* insisting human choice completes what grace began.

## The Solas Still Matter

If FWS is a “blessed inconsistency,” *why* isn't Rome also?

**In principle both systems do the same thing, only differently. Each travels a different path to the same end of the road, and with different intent, but each still arrives at the same destination**

- Rome affirms grace as necessary (but adds self-produced works)
- FWS affirms grace as necessary (but adds self-choice, self-produced faith, obedience, cooperation etc.)

Both add *something* to grace alone.

If one is a blessed inconsistency, *why* not the other?

**Sproul would say:** “Because Rome **formally** denies Sola Fide in council decrees.”

Yes, Rome's “anathema” of Sola Fide is formal. Meaning, it is *intended*. This *is* a real distinction. The FWS system is a **functional** denial of Sola Gratia in testimony, teaching and practice. I am convinced that there is no “formal” *intent* to deny Sola Gratia by the vast majority of FWSA. For most, it may be as simple as they just have not “thought it through.” They are, I am convinced, like the Galatians were, “deceived” by the subtle error of their system and “bewitched” by the same. But the very real danger remains – what begins as ignorance can and does transition to rebellion after exposure to the truth. And at no time in the book of Galatians did Paul give the assembly a “pass” for sincerity at the expense of truth – consistently held to

and applied. Rather, what Paul does is to systematically dismantle the false teaching of the Judaizers and show why it is not compatible with the gospel of grace alone.

**Whether formal or functional, any denial of a “Sola” practically speaking, is still a denial a “Sola.” This is always very dangerous.**

The issue is not needless division over semantics: If salvation depends even fractionally on the will of man, then grace *alone* is no longer grace alone, and God no longer receives *all* glory. To echo Paul, “*It depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who has mercy.*” (Rom. 9:16). This is revealed truth. And the context of Romans 9, as well as the way Paul applied this to the believing church of Jew and Gentile at the end of the chapter, make his meaning and application crystal clear.

Mathematically it would be expressed as “**Salvation = grace + 0**”. It does not matter how small the percentage of self is. Anything more than net-zero is a denial of the absolute sufficiency of grace and a subtle affirmation of the error of Rome. This is not mere inconsistency. It is theological error condemned by Paul and in danger of ultimate rejection by God. This was Paul’s point. He never rebuked the Galatians for an *intentional* defection from grace to the works of the Law or self-effort (the practical meaning is the same), but he still exposed that the same danger was present as if they had - “You have fallen from grace,” “Christ will profit you nothing,” “You are severed from Christ” – these are very strong words!

Sproul’s warning to Rome needs to reverberate within Protestant Evangelicalism’s walls: many affirm the *terminology of grace* while denying its sufficiency in practice.

- True unity in the gospel requires more than shared vocabulary outwardly affirmed but either defined differently or inwardly denied; **it requires shared truth.**

**The Objection: “The Gospel Is Christ Crucified, Not Mechanics of *How*”**

Some might object: “The gospel is Christ crucified and risen (1 Cor 15:1-4), not the mechanics of how salvation is applied. Sola Gratia is important but secondary.”

This objection is superficially appealing but ultimately incoherent. Here’s why:

**The Test of Consistency**

If “the gospel” consists only of the objective facts - Christ died for sins and bodily rose - then several uncomfortable implications follow:

First, by that definition, **Rome has the gospel.** Rome affirms Christ's death, resurrection, and ascension. Yet Protestants, following Luther and Sproul, insist Rome denies the gospel. Why? *Because* Rome adds works to faith for justification. But if the gospel is only the what (death/resurrection), not the how (justification by faith alone), then Rome's addition of works is merely a secondary error, not an essential, gospel-denying heresy. The entire Protestant Reformation becomes a massive overreaction then – for given the importance of unity, if Rome's error is a secondary rather than an essential gospel error, then ultimately who cares? And why are we Protestant? As Protestants, we affirm that the *how* of justification *is* an essential. Thus, as Protestants we all affirm that “the gospel” *is* more than the fact that Christ died and rose again. Meaning, we would all – and *must* all agree that 1 Cor 15:1-3 contain elements of the whole but are not exhaustively the whole gospel. Again, *if* it is, then Sola Fide is not and cannot be for 1 Cor 15:1-4 makes no mention of the *how* of justification by faith alone. At best it is *implied* by the statement “Christ died for our sins.” But if so, that still only verifies that the basic statements of 1 Cor 15:1-4 *require* substantial theological unpacking to get to the the fullness of what they mean. *That is* precisely the point I am arguing herein: Sola Fide is to the gospel what Sola Gratia is to Sola Fide.

Second, if the objection above is valid, then **Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses would be saved.** Both groups affirm that Jesus is the Son of God, that He died for sins, and that He rose from the dead. They differ on the ontology of Christ (created vs. eternal), but they don't deny He is “the Son.” *If* the gospel is exhausted by mere superficial reading of 1 Corinthians 15:1-4, without further theological unpacking, *then* these groups have the gospel. Yet no orthodox Christian would accept this conclusion.

Third, by the same logic as th first two above, **Unitarians would be saved.** Modalistic Unitarians - those who deny the Trinity, claiming Father, Son, and Spirit are merely different expressions of one person, still affirm Christ's death and resurrection. If the gospel is only the objective fact of His death and resurrection, their denial of the Trinity is also then, a mere secondary error. But Scripture and historic Christianity reject this.

### **The Galatian Precedent**

The book of Galatians demolishes this objection decisively. The Galatians affirmed:

- Christ is the Messiah
- Christ died for sins
- Christ rose from the dead

- Faith in Christ is necessary

### **They had the 1 Corinthians 15:1-4 “gospel.”**

Yet Paul declared they were turning to “another gospel” (Gal 1:6). He pronounced an anathema on anyone preaching this distorted message - even an angel from heaven (Gal 1:8-9). He warned that those who added circumcision to faith had “fallen from grace” and that “Christ will be of no benefit” to them (Gal 5:2-4).

**What was their error?** Not denying Christ's death and resurrection. Not rejecting the Trinity. Not claiming Jesus wasn't the Son of God. Their error was *adding* works of the Law to grace alone as the means of salvation.

✚ **For Paul, compromising the *how* was denying the gospel, even when the *what* and the *who* was affirmed.**

### **The Inseparability of Who, What, and How**

Therefore, the how of salvation is inseparable from both the what and the who:

- Get the **who** wrong (Jesus is created, not eternal God), and the **what** becomes insufficient (a created being cannot atone for infinite sin against an infinite God).
- Get the **what** wrong (Christ's death wasn't substitutionary atonement), and the **gospel** itself is lost.
- Get the **how** wrong (grace + works, or grace + autonomous will), and **Christ's work and the grace of God alone, is rendered insufficient** because both are left requiring human supplementation – which is addition. Which is a denial of the “Sola” in “Sola Gratia.”
- **Salvation = grace + 0. Period.**

**All three elements; Christology, atonement, and soteriology, are essential. Deny or compromise any of them, and “the gospel” is lost.**

This is why Sola Gratia is not secondary to Sola Fide but foundational to it. If faith itself is a work we contribute, then justification is by faith + works, and Sola Fide collapses into the very system the Reformers condemned. The Solas are interdependent: touch one, and you've touched them all.

**Objection:** “Paul distinguishes faith from works, so faith is not a ‘work’. Therefore, Arminianism / synergism does not teach we are saved by works even though it affirms faith is our self-generated response.”

**My Refutation:**

This objection misses the point entirely. Yes, Paul distinguished faith from works, but on what basis? **Not on the basis of origin** (self-generated vs. grace-given), **but on the basis of function** (receptive vs. productive). Faith passively receives Christ’s own righteousness – which is not self-produced; works attempt to produce righteousness by its own merit. That is *why* Paul distinguished between faith from works. But of crucial distinction here is that Paul's categorical distinction says nothing about whether faith is self-originated or grace given.

The critical question is not whether faith differs from works. When understood the way Paul meant it – faith that receives the righteousness of Christ imputed, we all agree it does that. The question is: **Does saving faith originate from our unregenerated will, or is it produced in us by God's sovereign grace?**

Scripture answers decisively: faith is grace-given, not self-generated.

1. **Jesus declared:** “This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent.” (John 6:29). \

**The Genitive of Origin: God as the Source, Not Merely the Object**

Jesus declared in John 6:29: “This is **the work of God** (τὸ ἔργον τοῦ θεοῦ), that you believe in Him whom He has sent.”

The Greek construction here is **decisive**: τοῦ θεοῦ (tou theou) is a **genitive of origin** (also called subjective genitive), signifying that **God is the source** of this work, not merely its object. Believing is not the work *we* do for God, but *the work God does in us*.

**The grammatical evidence is overwhelming:**

**A). Had Jesus meant “work directed toward God” or “work pleasing to God,” Greek provided clear ways to express this.** The debate over whether τοῦ θεοῦ is a subjective genitive (God does the work) or objective genitive (work God requires) has been settled by examining the flow of John 6's argument, which consistently emphasizes God's gift and initiative.

**B). Compare Hebrews 6:1**, where the writer speaks of “**faith toward God**” (πίστεως ἐπὶ θεόν - *pisteōs epi theon*). Notice the construction: when Scripture wants to express faith *directed toward* God as its object, it uses the preposition **ἐπὶ** (epi) + accusative, meaning “toward” or “upon.”

**The contrast is stark:**

- **John 6:29:** τὸ ἔργον τοῦ θεοῦ (the work *of God* - genitive, indicating source/origin)
- **Hebrews 6:1:** πίστεως ἐπὶ θεόν (faith *toward God* - preposition, indicating direction/object)

**If Jesus had intended to say “work directed toward God” or “work that pleases God,” He could have used ἔργον ἐπὶ θεόν or ἔργον πρὸς θεόν. But He didn't.** The genitive construction τοῦ θεοῦ indicates possession and origin: this work *belongs to* God and *originates from* God.

2. **Peter wrote:** “To those who have obtained a faith of the same kind as ours by the righteousness of our God and Savior, Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 1:1). The word “obtained” (λαχοῦσιν) is passive and means “to receive by lot, to be allotted.” Faith is not self-generated; it is divinely allotted.
3. **Paul declared:** “[Lydia] the Lord opened her heart to respond to Paul's message” (Acts 16:14). Grace opened; she responded. The enabling preceded and produced the response.
4. **Paul wrote:** “To you it has been granted...to believe in Him” (Phil. 1:29). Faith is *granted*, not self-generated.

The apparent tension between John 1:12 (“received” - ἔλαβον, active voice) and 2 Peter 1:1 (“obtained” - λαχοῦσιν, passive voice) is fully resolved when we recognize they describe *sequential* realities: First, we passively receive the allotment of faith as God's gift (2 Pet. 1:1). Second, by means of which we then actively receive Christ (John 1:12). We do not produce our own faith (passive receipt), but we do actively trust Him with the faith we've been graciously given (active exercise). This is the only consistent harmonization of all the relevant passages and truths in scripture.

This is precisely Paul's point in Ephesians 2:8-9: “By grace you have been saved through faith - and this not of yourselves, it is the gift of God - not of works, so that no one may boast.” *If* faith originated from ourselves, from our unregenerated will, *then* we do have something “of ourselves” to boast in! Our self-generated faith

becomes the sole, *decisive* element that differentiated us from unbelievers. Paul's "so that no one may boast" becomes meaningless if we contributed the very thing that made the only decisive difference between salvation or damnation. This is basic reasoning here. It is not deep nuanced logic. Paul's entire point in Ephesians 2:8-9 is to deny *all* grounds of boasting of self in *any* capacity *for any reason*. If faith is self-produced and there is no salvation apart from faith, then synergism nullifies the entire point that Paul repeatedly made – "So that no flesh should boast, it is *because of Him* that you are in Christ Jesus" (1 Cor. 1:29-30)

**The synergist faces an inescapable dilemma:** If two people hear the gospel and one believes while the other doesn't, *what accounts for the difference?* The synergist must answer: "One chose to believe and accept, the other didn't." But this means the believer *contributed something the unbeliever lacked* - the *decisive* act of will to believe and accept. This is functionally meritorious, however vigorously they deny the label. The end-result is the same thing that Paul explicitly denied.

By contrast, the biblical position maintains: the difference is *entirely attributable to grace* – hence truly "*Sola Gratia*". One heart was sovereignly opened (Acts 16:14); the other was not. One was allotted faith by God's righteousness (2 Pet. 1:1); the other was not. Only this consistently upholds "so that no one may boast."

So yes, Paul distinguished faith from works. But he never taught that faith is self-generated. That distinction belongs entirely to Arminian/ synergistic innovation, not apostolic teaching. When we define faith's origin as Paul, Luke, Peter, and Jesus did - **as the gracious gift and sovereign work of God**, *only then* do we rightly distinguish faith from works while maintaining Sola Gratia.

**Test: What makes something "the same error"?**

**Answer:** *Same structural pattern + same theological effect*

**Structural pattern:**

- Judaizers: Grace is necessary but *not sufficient* (requires circumcision)
- FWS: Grace necessary but *not sufficient* (requires autonomous human choice)

**Theological effect:**

- Judaizers: Human contribution becomes co-condition
- FWS: Human contribution becomes co-condition

**Result in both cases:**

- Grace is no longer *alone*
- The *sola* is destroyed
- Boasting is reintroduced (even if unintentionally)
- 

“The gospel” of Scripture remains what it has *always* been: Salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, to the glory of God alone.

The Solas still matter...and they *always* will.

© 2025 thesolasmatter.com. All rights reserved