

A RESPONSE TO HODGES: HOW TO LEAD A PERSON TO CHRIST, PARTS 1 AND 2

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I. INTRODUCTION

I appreciate the opportunity given by Grace Evangelical Society to respond to the articles by Zane C. Hodges, “How to Lead a Person to Christ, Part 1: The Content of our Message”¹ and “How to Lead a Person to Christ, Part 2: Our Invitation to Respond.”² While my admiration and appreciation for Mr. Hodges is of the highest order, I nevertheless feel constrained to reply to these articles, which I feel contain some issues that need to be addressed. Hopefully, this dialogue will lead to a greater understanding of the gospel, which we both hold so dear.

I agree that the message of the gospel should not be loaded up with extraneous content as the Lordship Salvation position does. The effort of Hodges to find “the core issue in bringing men and women to faith and eternal life”³ is commendable and necessary. However, I disagree as to what comprises the core issue. My difference with the articles concerns the issue of progressive revelation and the centrality of the work of Christ on the cross for salvation.

¹ Zane C. Hodges, “How to Lead a Person to Christ, Part 1: The Content of our Message,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 13 (Autumn 2000): 3-12.

² Zane C. Hodges, “How to Lead a Person to Christ, Part 2: Our Invitation to Respond,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 14 (Spring 2001): 9-18.

³ Hodges, “How to Lead a Person to Christ, Part 1,” 7.

II. THE PROGRESS OF REVELATION

In the two articles, Hodges focused exclusively on the Gospel of John. While he is correct that “the Gospel of John is the only book in our New Testament canon that explicitly declares its purpose to be evangelistic,”⁴ his total reliance on that book alone for soteriological truth creates a needless dichotomy with the rest of the New Testament. While John may not *emphasize* the death of Christ in his presentation on how to receive everlasting life,⁵ the centrality of the cross becomes clear in the remainder of the New Testament (this will be discussed more later). Single-minded focus and reliance on one book of the Bible, while ignoring the testimony of the rest of Scripture, is not too far from using a verse out of context to support an erroneous theological position.⁶

It is unclear why Hodges focuses on the misunderstanding by the disciples of the coming death and resurrection of Christ (cf. John 20:9).⁷ How are these men any different from any other Old Testament believer? One could go all the way back to Abraham who “believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness” (Gen 15:6). Abraham had eternal life at that point, and yet surely he did not really understand the future crucifixion and resurrection of the Messiah. But he believed in the promise of a Deliverer, and that is what the disciples in John are doing.⁸

But Hodges uses the experience of the disciples to conclude that the cross is not relevant to understanding the gospel. But their experience is from a prior dispensation and it is wrong to make that incomplete

⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵ Although the arrest, crucifixion, and resurrection narrative take up two chapters, 18 and 19. In fact, John’s account of the passion week takes up almost half of the book, Chapters 12-20.

⁶ For example, the Church of Christ denomination, to a great extent, uses one verse, Acts 2:38, to build their entire soteriological doctrine.

⁷ John 20:9 says, “For as yet they did not know the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead.”

⁸ Even Abraham later received a picture of the substitutionary atonement by Christ on the cross when God provided a ram to sacrifice in place of his son Isaac (Gen 22:13-14).

experience a basis for comprehending the gospel in the Church age. I agree with the position of Ryrie regarding progressive revelation:

The basis of salvation in every age is the death of Christ; the *requirement* for salvation in every age is faith; the *object* of faith in every age is God; the *content* of faith changes in the various dispensations.

It is this last point, of course, that distinguishes dispensationalism from covenant theology, but it is not a point to which the charge of teaching two ways of salvation can be attached. It simply recognizes the obvious fact of progressive revelation. When Adam looked upon the coats of skins with which God had clothed him

and his wife, he did not see what the believer today sees looking back on the cross of Calvary. And neither did other Old Testament saints see what we can see today (*italics in original*).⁹

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So it seems reasonable to expect the disciples of Jesus to have an incomplete understanding of the coming crucifixion. But Hodges, by narrowly focusing on one book of the Bible, the Gospel of John, has forced truth from the Mosaic dispensation onto the Church Age. Thus, for him, the misunderstanding by the disciples becomes an indicator that the crucifixion of Christ is not essential to the gospel. But now we have the complete revelation of the mind of God—the Bible. God has not limited soteriological truth to the Gospel of John. The totality of Scripture must be considered for the full expression of the doctrine of salvation.

⁹ Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 115.

III. THE CENTRALITY OF THE CROSS

The lack of consideration for progressive revelation seems to lead Hodges to disregard the centrality of the sacrifice of Christ on the cross as payment for sin. He writes, “Neither explicitly nor implicitly does the Gospel of John teach that a person must understand the cross to be saved.”¹⁰ And, “People are not saved by believing that Jesus died on the cross.”¹¹ Finally, “The simple truth is that Jesus can be believed for eternal salvation apart from any detailed knowledge of what He did to provide it.”¹²

I think Hodges has overstated the case with regard to the lack of references to the crucifixion of Christ in the Gospel of John. For example, the death of Christ is proclaimed implicitly in John 3:14-15: “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.” Surely, the post-crucifixion reader of these words would have understood that eternal life was obtained by believing in the Christ *who was raised up and died on the cross*.

Another implicit Johannine reference to the crucifixion in a soteriological context is in John 6:51-54:

I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.

The reference to eating the flesh and drinking the blood of Christ is unquestionably a reference to the death of Jesus and would have been understood this way by the reader of John.¹³

Paul certainly gives emphasis to the cross. It is the core of his gospel message. To the Romans he writes, “But God demonstrates His

¹⁰ Hodges, “How to Lead a Person to Christ, Part 1,” 7.

¹¹ Hodges, “How to Lead a Person to Christ, Part 2,” 10.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Jesus also made a clear reference to His death in John 10:15 when He said, “I lay down My life for the sheep.”

own love toward us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). In 1 Corinthians the union between the person of Christ and His work on the cross is clear: “For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2). Later in the same epistle, Paul defines the gospel:

Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures (1 Cor 15:1-4).

Also instructive is the preaching of Paul as recorded by Luke in Acts 17:2-3: “Then Paul, as his custom was, went in to them, and for three Sabbaths reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and demonstrating that the Christ had to suffer and rise again from the dead, and saying, “This Jesus whom I preach to you is the Christ.” Like John (cf. John 20:31),¹⁴ Paul proclaimed Jesus as the Christ and sought to bring people to faith in Him. But notice that Paul’s presentation of Jesus as the Christ included His death and resurrection.

I believe the “bottom line” of the gospel message is the substitutionary sacrifice for sin by Christ on the cross.

From the very beginning, death has always been the payment for sin: “And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, ‘Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely

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¹⁴ The purpose of the Gospel of John, as found in 20:31, is to persuade the reader to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the result of which is everlasting life. The verse says, “But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.”

die” (Gen 2:16-17). The suggestion of a suffering Deliverer appears as early as Gen 3:15, the *protevangelium*. There God announced judgment on the serpent, Satan: “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel.”¹⁵ The blood of “a lamb . . . without blemish” (Exod 12:5) in the Passover account provides a picture of “Christ, our Passover” (1 Cor 5:7). The whole Levitical sacrificial system pointed the way to the blood of “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).¹⁶ I concur with Article V of the doctrinal statement of Dallas Theological Seminary:

We believe that according to the “eternal purpose” of God (Eph 3:11) salvation in the divine reckoning is always “by grace through faith,” and *rests upon the basis of the shed blood of Christ . . .* We believe that it has always been true that “without faith it is impossible to please” God (Heb. 11:6), and that the principle of faith was prevalent in the lives of all the Old Testament saints. However, we believe that it was historically impossible that they should have had as the conscious object of their faith *the incarnate, crucified Son*, the Lamb of God (John 1:29), and that it is evident that they did not comprehend as we do that the sacrifices depicted the person and work of Christ (italics added).

In contrast, Hodges does not see “the shed blood of Christ” as intrinsic to the gospel message. For him, the death of Christ is merely the “*avenue* through which men and women come to understand why

¹⁵ Modern scholarship has tended to dispel the notion of Messianic prophecy in Gen 3:15. But see the discussion by Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Messianic Christology* (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries, 1998), 14-17; and Walter C. Kaiser, *The Messiah in the Old Testament*, Studies in Old Testament Biblical Theology (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 37-38.

¹⁶ Glaser and Glaser have shown that, based on Leviticus 16, two goats were offered in sacrifice on the Day of Atonement. One goat was killed as a sacrifice for sin. The other was released into the wilderness, illustrating the actual removal of sin. This second goat was called the scapegoat. Leviticus 16:5 makes it clear that the two goats together constituted one offering for sin: “two kids of a goat as a sin offering.” John the Baptist, in John 1:29, combined the idea of the slaughtered goat, the sacrifice for sin, and the scapegoat, the removal of sin. Mitch and Zhava Glaser, *The Fall Feasts of Israel* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1987), 86-90.

they can trust completely in the Savior” (italics added).¹⁷ The crucifixion and resurrection are only “facts *surrounding* the gospel message” (italics added).¹⁸ I believe the cross is more than just a vehicle to lead a person to the Savior. The death of Christ for sin is inherent in what it means to believe in Christ for everlasting life. I do not agree that “trust in Christ *can occur* without a knowledge of the cross (italics in original).”¹⁹ In this dispensation, the age of the Church, an understanding of sin and the sufficient payment for sin by our Lord on the cross is fundamental to salvation.

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With regard to Hodges’s deserted island scenario,²⁰ I disagree that the man in the illustration receives eternal life by believing portions of John 6:43-47 that washed ashore. This man may have no concept of sin or his need for a Savior. The name Jesus is just a word on a piece of paper with no content. For all we know, the man thinks everlasting life is a “fountain of youth.” Instead, I see this man as a lost person who has received some light. I trust that God will now bring him more light in the form of a missionary or perhaps a New Testament that washes ashore.

Hodges rightly calls the actions of Jesus on the cross “indispensable.”²¹ But how can facts that are indispensable not be part

¹⁷ Hodges, “How to Lead a Person to Christ, Part 1,” 11.

¹⁸ Hodges, “How to Lead a Person to Christ, Part 2,” 11.

¹⁹ Ibid. While a person may trust Christ to meet a need without a knowledge of the cross, an understanding of the sufficiency of the death of Christ is essential for eternal salvation.

²⁰ Cf. Hodges, “How to Lead a Person to Christ, Part 1,” 4. In this hypothetical story, a man who has never heard of Christianity is marooned on a deserted island. Fragments of John 6:43-47 wash ashore. All that is readable is “Jesus therefore answered and said to them” (v. 43), and “Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life” (v. 47). Hodges believes this man is eternally saved if he “becomes convinced that this person called Jesus can guarantee his eternal future.”

²¹ Ibid., 11.

and parcel to the gospel? How can the person of Christ be separated from the work of Christ?

In the final analysis, the exclusive reliance by Hodges on the Gospel of John has led him to this very position: a division of the person of Christ from the work of Christ. The logical extension of this is that the incarnation and crucifixion of the Son of God were not even necessary. But who Christ is and what He did are inseparable. John unites the person and work of the Lord when he writes, “If I do not do the works of My Father, do not believe Me; but if I do, though you do not believe Me, believe the works, that you may know and believe that the Father is in Me and I in Him” (John 10:37-38). The works that Jesus did gave testimony to His person. And Paul says to the Corinthians, “But we preach Christ crucified” (1 Cor 1:23). His message united the person of Jesus (He is the “Christ”) with His work (He was “crucified”).

Hodges is correct when he writes, “We are not saved by believing a series of theological propositions, however true and important they may be. We are saved by believing in Jesus.”²² I agree with his insistence that “we need to lead men to *Christ* (italics in original)!”²³ But the death of Christ for sin is not mere theological baggage that is added to the gospel. It is not “some concept that must be theologically clarified.”²⁴ It is an essential part of the gospel and is indivisible with who He is. I believe in a *historical, crucified* Christ, not just a name on a piece of paper.

IV. CONCLUSION

I appreciate the effort of Hodges to refine and clarify the doctrine of salvation. I share this goal. But I take issue with his conclusions regarding the basic presentation of the gospel. When I read “How to Lead a Person to Christ, Parts 1 and 2,” I conclude that Hodges does not think the cross is essential to the presentation of the gospel. According to him, the substitutionary death of Christ on behalf of a person is not a core element of the gospel.

²² *Ibid.*, 5.

²³ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁴ Hodges, “How to Lead a Person to Christ, Part 2,” 11.

In reply, I believe Hodges has ignored the progress of revelation, which has further led him to dismiss the foundational issue that death has always been the required payment for sin. By doing so he has artificially bifurcated the person and work of Christ. For sure, I believe that salvation is through faith alone in Christ alone. But my faith is in the Christ who died in my place, paying the penalty for my sin.

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