

# A REVIEW OF THOMAS STEGALL'S *THE GOSPEL OF THE CHRIST*<sup>1</sup>

EDITOR

## I. THE THESIS OF THE BOOK

The main thesis of the book is that in order to be born again a person must believe in “the Lord’s deity, humanity, substitutionary death, and bodily resurrection, i.e., [in] His person, work, and provision” (p. 19). Note that believing in Jesus for eternal life, or for justification, is not included in that definition. Presumably the person must also believe in justification or salvation by faith alone, apart from works, but surprisingly that is not stated in the preface and is only sparingly stated in this book (e.g., p. 342).

Only once did I find a place where he lists all that a person must believe to be born again. And this list was not a list at all, but headings spread over 25 pages (pp. 353-77).

## II. THE PURPOSE OF THE BOOK

The author’s main purpose seems to be to sound the alarm for people inside the Free Grace movement that Zane Hodges, John Niemelä, René López, Bob Wilkin, Grace Evangelical Society, and others whom the author believes have been masquerading as Free Grace proponents when they are in reality enemies of Jesus Christ and His gospel. Indeed, on at least one occasion Stegall drops the theological H bomb, saying that we proclaim a “new *heretical* gospel” (p. 336, italics added).

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas L. Stegall, *The Gospel of the Christ: A Biblical Response to the Crossless Gospel Regarding the Contents of Saving Faith* (Milwaukee, WI: Grace Gospel Press, 2009). 826 pp. Cloth, \$34.99.

The subject index shows the attention he pays to Zane Hodges, me, GES, and others. Note on how many pages the following individuals and organizations are mentioned in the 753 pages of the text:

Robert N. Wilkin	165 pages
Zane C. Hodges	131 pages
GES	126 pages
Jeremy Myers	52 pages
René López	42 pages
John Niemelä	33 pages
Bob Bryant	16 pages. <sup>2</sup>

The above figures regarding references to GES differ from Stegall's subject index. The index says that Grace Evangelical Society is mentioned on just 10 pages (pp. 21, 35, 41, 57, 64, 228, 270, 750-52). However, Grace Evangelical Society is found on at least 72 additional pages,<sup>3</sup> not counting the scores of pages on which the author mentions *JOTGES* or *Grace in Focus* but without specifically mentioning Grace Evangelical Society. In addition, I found 44 additional pages in which he puts GES but not Grace Evangelical Society.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> No other author or organization is cited 50 times or more. Only eleven other authors are cited on 15 or more pages, and most of these (nearly all after the first four) are leading Reformed or Arminian Lordship Salvation theologians: Charles C. Ryrie (46 pages), J. B. Hixson (28 pages), Lewis Sperry Chafer (26 pages), John F. Walvoord (26 pages), Daniel B. Wallace (24 pages), Leon Morris (21 pages), Douglas J. Moo (20 pages), A. T. Robertson (19 pages), I. Howard Marshall (17 pages), Norman L. Geisler (16 pages), and Darrell L. Bock (15 pages).

<sup>3</sup> Stegall, *The Gospel*, 29, 34n, 37, 39, 40n, 43n, 44n, 45n, 46, 48, 53n, 55, 72, 96, 99, 100n, 102n, 110n, 112, 113, 116, 118, 120n, 156, 198n, 204, 212n, 217, 218n, 219, 220, 221, 223, 224n, 231n, 232n, 260n, 275, 279n, 280n, 283n, 286n, 297n, 298n, 304n, 321n, 322n, 323n, 341n, 356n, 365n, 369n, 412n, 417n, 445n, 468n, 480, 481n, 501n, 509, 512n, 536n, 549n, 556n, 594, 597n, 621n, 623n, 631n, 678n, 706n, 749n.

<sup>4</sup> See 36, 38n, 42n, 54n, 104, 122, 124, 125, 126, 127, 155, 158, 199, 202, 212, 225, 226, 227, 228, 229, 254, 266, 269, 270, 276, 305, 332n, 383, 384n, 395, 402, 404, 418, 419, 424, 425, 448, 457, 458, 476, 546, 533, 595, 625.

### III. THE CROSSLESS GOSPEL

According to the subject index the expression *crossless gospel* only appears on 4 pages (pp. 124-27). Yet it occurs hundreds of times throughout the book, sometimes as often as seven times on one page.<sup>5</sup> There are 16 variations used of the expression *the crossless gospel*, including: the unmodified expression *the crossless gospel*,<sup>6</sup> and a host of modified versions: *the new crossless gospel*,<sup>7</sup> *today's new crossless gospel*,<sup>8</sup> *today's crossless gospel*,<sup>9</sup> *crossless gospel advocates*,<sup>10</sup> *crossless gospel teachers*,<sup>11</sup> *crossless gospel proponents*,<sup>12</sup> *crossless gospel exegetes*,<sup>13</sup> *the crossless gospel position*,<sup>14</sup> *the crossless gospel's doctrine*,<sup>15</sup> *the crossless gospel conclusion*,<sup>16</sup> *the crossless gospel approach*,<sup>17</sup> *the crossless, resurrectionless gospel*,<sup>18</sup> *the crossless gospel interpretation*,<sup>19</sup> *today's crossless, deityless gospel*,<sup>20</sup> and *a crossless, resurrectionless version of the gospel*.<sup>21</sup> The

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<sup>5</sup> For example, in one paragraph, taking up a little more than a half page, Stegall uses the word *crossless* four times (626). On one full page, 125, he uses the word *crossless* a whopping seven times.

<sup>6</sup> Stegall, *The Gospel*, 15, 86, 125, 126, 127, 398, 443, 528, 602, 603, 619, 626.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 72, 377, 564, 596.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 82, 454.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 198, 377, 532, 547, 602, 621.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 41, 213, 530.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 72, 353, 402, 407, 458, 468, 479, 506, 508, 534, 536, 539, 548, 581, 596.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 447.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 129, 379, 416, 507, 510, 555, 614, 623, 652.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 161. The full expression is "the crossless gospel's doctrine of progressive revelation and the contents of saving faith."

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 424.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 533.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 506, 654.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 506.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 608.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 511.

author also utilizes more than twenty other expressions using the word *crossless* but not with the word *gospel*.<sup>22</sup>

Only once in the book did he label *his position*. When referring to a seminary that agrees with his position he called it “a non-crossless Free Grace school.”<sup>23</sup> Thus he calls his position *the non-crossless gospel position*. It seems a bit cumbersome to have a double negative (*non-* and *-less* mean *not* and *without*) for a title. But *the cross gospel position*, a natural option, certainly sounds odd too. I think *the five essentials position* is more descriptive and less awkward.

The author at one point acknowledges that we find the label *the crossless gospel* to be misleading and offensive (p. 125). He defends his use of this pejorative expression by pointing out that John MacArthur says that he reluctantly used the expression *Lordship Salvation* to describe his own view as a concession to popular usage. Yet we use the expression *Lordship Salvation* all the time since it accurately presents the position.

However unlike MacArthur, we do not use *the crossless gospel* to describe our position. And there is nothing negative or pejorative about the label *Lordship Salvation*. Obviously there is no salvation unless Jesus is Lord.

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<sup>22</sup>These include “the new crossless, resurrectionless, deityless ‘saving message’ of today’s Grace Evangelical Society” (p. 48) “crossless theology” (p. 63), “crossless advocates” (pp. 63, 281, 626), “crossless adherents” (p. 627), “crossless teachers” (p. 215), “crossless proponents” (pp. 289, 290, 399, 426, 548, 549, 624, 626), “the crossless saving faith” (pp. pp. 125, 549), “the crossless content of saving faith,” (pp. 127, 399), “the crossless persuasion,” (p. 374), “a crossless, resurrectionless ‘Christ’” (p. 383), “crossless saving faith” (pp. 412, 565, 623), “a crossless, resurrectionless promise of eternal life” (p. 416), “the crossless position” (pp. 425, 444, 446, 447, 459, 596, 613, 614, 615), “the crossless view” (pp. 443, 623), “the crossless, G.E.S. [sic] position” (p. 458), “this new crossless view” (p. 480), “the crossless, resurrectionless message of life” (p. 481), “his crossless interpretation” (p. 501), “crossless ‘saving message’” (pp. 529, 615), “the crossless position” (pp. 531, 533, 556), and “the crossless notion” (p. 626).

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 577. The author seems to have had trouble figuring out what to call his own position. He didn’t want to call the school that agreed with him, “the cross school” or “the cross-plus school.” He wouldn’t want to call his own position “the cross gospel,” or “the cross-plus gospel.” It will be interesting to see what name he comes up with for his position that includes the cross of Christ and yet doesn’t sound odd.

Stegall's defense of this pejorative and misleading expression is not convincing.<sup>24</sup> Worse yet, it tends to offend people who disagree with him and make it less likely that they will actually read his book.

Stegall reminds me of the abortion advocate who repeatedly speaks of his opponents as the *anti-choice* proponents. Evidently Stegall thinks if he can craft the wording of the debate, he will win the day.

## IV. STRENGTHS OF THE WORK

The main strengths of this book are its bibliography (32 pages), author index (7 pages), Scripture index (12 pages), and the extensive discussion of some of the issues involved (826 pages). There are over 100 pages devoted to 1 Cor 15:1-11 (pp. 483-589), 25 pages to Acts 13:23-48 (pp. 353-77), and 34 pages to Acts 2:38 (pp. 629-62). While there is much Stegall fails to discuss even with all those pages, and while much of his exegesis is suspect, it is very helpful to have such extended discussion.

Having met the author and spent an hour discussing these issues with him about five years ago, I consider him to be sincere, driven, and dedicated. Those are all highly admirable qualities and they do come through in the words of the book.

## VI. MAIN WEAKNESSES OF THE WORK

### A. DEPENDENCE ON TRADITION

I believe the underlining weakness that causes all the rest is that Stegall is blinded by tradition. As Acts 17:11 shows, we must be able to overcome our tradition if God's Word contradicts our tradition. Yet Stegall unasham-

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<sup>24</sup>If I held his view and wanted to come up with a fair label for our view I'd call it *the promise of life view* or *the message of life view*. Those are simple, accurate, and non-pejorative. And they are what we sometimes call our view.

edly refers repeatedly in this book to *tradition* as proof that his view is correct.<sup>25</sup> He rejects the promise of life view because it does not fit Church tradition, Evangelical tradition, Free Grace tradition, and his own tradition. He views the promise of life position as a radical departure from established truth.<sup>26</sup> He is so influenced by his tradition that he cannot give a fair hearing to the Biblical arguments of others. Like a five-point Calvinist, he thinks his tradition is right and he seeks ways to prove his tradition (from, tradition, theology, logic, and Scripture), rather than searching the Scriptures and letting them speak for themselves.

## **B. FAILURE TO EXPLAIN OR DEFEND THE FREE GRACE POSITION**

One might read this book and fail to notice that like the emperor with no clothes, this book doesn't contain the Free Grace message.

The back cover of the book explains how that could be: "Evangelical Christians agree that faith in Jesus is necessary for eternal life. But what is the essential content of that faith? A segment of evangelicals today is openly denying that belief in Jesus' deity, substitutionary death for our sins, and bodily resurrection is necessary to be saved." He does go on to add, "Those who have departed from traditional Free Grace theology are now claiming that the lost must simply know the name of 'Jesus' and believe in His promise of everlasting life in order to be born again. But is this what it means biblically to believe in Christ? Can anyone know with certainty what God requires?"

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<sup>25</sup> Stegall writes, for example, "The new gospel [of GES]... represents a radical departure from both Scripture and *the historic Grace position* (29, italics added), and "They [GES] have left the tradition of all that can properly be called Free Grace" (p. 751). See also the back cover, which begins with the words, "Evangelical Christians agree..."

<sup>26</sup> In addition to the preceding note, see also Stegall, *The Gospel*, 35 ("radical change"), 46 ("a dramatic changing of the gospel"), 60 ("doctrinal departures"), 78 ("[GES's] aberrant doctrines"), 87 ("this new view").

Thus Stegall is speaking about what “Evangelical Christians agree.” That is clearly not the Free Grace position.

Of course, even if the author believes the object of faith is five things and not simply the Lord Jesus and His promise of life, one would still expect that he would have some discussion of the Free Grace position. Thus we would expect him to discuss that saving faith is simple assent. He doesn't do that. We would expect him to discuss how a person can be sure of his eternal destiny by faith apart from works. This he does not do. We would expect him to discuss motivations for serving God, including the Bēma, God's discipline, God's blessings, and certainly not fear of hell. But he doesn't discuss this either.

One of the most remarkable things about this book is that even in 826 pages the author never lays out or defends the Free Grace view.<sup>27</sup>

### **C. LUKE 18:9-14: THE CLEAREST EVANGELISTIC TEXT IN THE GOSPELS?**

In a section entitled “Justification before Calvary” (pp. 182-84) Stegall turns Jesus' evangelistic ministry on its head. What is the clearest passage in the Four Gospels on what a person needed to believe during the ministry of Jesus to be born again?

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<sup>27</sup> Interestingly Word of Grace Bible Church, the church Stegall has pastored for over a decade, has a decidedly Free Grace website. Amazingly, when discussing salvation from the penalty of sin, the WOGBC website doesn't even mention the cross. In addition, the online testimony of Stegall himself and his co-pastor, Rick Gerhartz, both leave out some of Stegall's essentials. (Gerhartz fails to mention the cross at all and though Stegall does, he never indicates it is one the objects of saving faith.) Clearly the website was written long before this controversy emerged and hasn't been updated. One wonders, however, if the website's doctrinal statement and pastoral testimonies are not only inadequate, but heretical, to use Stegall's own term, then how did that material get in there in the first place, and how has it remained? For the church's statement on “Salvation from Sin's Penalty,” see <http://www.wogbc.org/about-word-of-grace/doctrinal-statement.html>. For the pastors' testimonies, see <http://www.wogbc.org/about-word-of-grace/church-board/49.html> and <http://www.wogbc.org/about-word-of-grace/church-board/48.html>. Accessed March 15, 2010.

Most Free Grace people would point to verses like John 3:1-18 or John 6:35-40 or John 11:25-27. However, the clearest passage according to the author is Luke 18:9-14.

If Luke 18:9-14 was the saving message during the ministry of Jesus, then John 3:1-18 is at best misleading and at worst a lie. Nicodemus, since this was still pre-cross, according to Stegall did not need to believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Messiah, to be born again. Rather, Nicodemus needed to believe what the tax collector believes in Luke 18.

Stegall says the tax collector was justified because he believed “in the one God” (monotheism); “that [God] is righteous”; that he was “an unworthy sinner”; and that “God would provide propitiation for sin.”<sup>28</sup>

Nicodemus believed all of that before Jesus told him that he had to believe in Him to be born again. So did the woman at the well.

What is the point of the Gospel of John if these four things were the object of saving faith prior to Calvary? Where do we find those four points in the OT? Where else do we find those four points in the NT? It seems odd for Stegall to pick a text that finds no correspondence elsewhere if it is indeed the clearest indication of what pre-cross people had to believe to be born again.<sup>29</sup>

It should be noted, however, that the Lord might not be referring to forensic justification in Luke 18:9-14. There is no other place in the NT where the Lord speaks of forensic justification. That has led some to conclude that Jesus was not speaking of forensic justification there at all, but

<sup>28</sup> Stegall, *The Gospel*, 183.

<sup>29</sup> Jesus did not say that the tax collector was justified *at the time he prayed*. He said, “I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Luke 18:14, emphasis added). It could be that the Lord is saying that he learned about and believed in Jesus before he left the temple. And thus he was justified not when he prayed, but when he believed in Jesus. This fits with the idea that God rewards those who diligently seek Him (Heb 11:6; cf. Acts 10:35). It also fits with what the Lord Jesus taught in His earthly ministry about what a person must do to have eternal life.

of being *vindicated* before God. Some see this as an issue of which man *pleased God* that day, not who went home forensically justified.<sup>30</sup>

In any case, Stegall's treatment of Luke 18:9-14 is inadequate.

#### D. VITRIOLIC TONE

As the subtitle suggests, this book is not irenic in tone. It is an attack. I am loathe to use that word. But other words—like interaction, dialogue, discussion, or debate—all fail to capture the truth. Stegall clearly views his opponents as heretics. Indeed he calls them heretics (p. 336). He is not subtle as to whom he is attacking. As I show above based on how often he cites people or organizations, he is primarily attacking me (on 165 pages), Zane C. Hodges, (on 131 pages), GES (on 116 pages), Jeremy Myers (on 52 pages), René López (on 42 pages), John Niemelä (on 33 pages) and Bob Bryant (on 16 pages).

Pejorative language is repeatedly used by the author. Though he knows that none of those who hold the view he is disparaging use that title of themselves, he persists in repeatedly speaking of *the crossless gospel*. The expression occurs hundreds of times in the book (see above). But that is the tip of the iceberg. Also included are things like “aberrant [theology]” (p. 25), “this new doctrine” (p. 54), “a new doctrine of faith” (p. 60), “doctrinal departures” (p. 60), “unique interpretation of John 20:31” (p. 67), “its aberrant doctrines” (p. 78), “this new gospel” (p. 78), “shamed into submission” (p. 80), “the false gospel of the reductionists” (p. 80), “assurance [is]...the new god of the crossless, resurrectionless, deityless gospel” (p. 98), “inclusivist” (p. 203), “shocking statements” (p. 31), “the new view” (p. 87), “the new aberrant Free Grace position” (p. 120), “this new heretical gospel” (p. 336), “the new aberrant form of the gospel” (p. 340), “an unending utopian existence” (p.

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<sup>30</sup> See Alberto S. Valdés, s.v. “Luke,” in *The Grace New Testament Commentary*, 1:318 and René López, “Is Prayer Essential for Salvation? Luke 18:9-14,” *Scripture Unlocked* (Fall 2009):1-2.

396),<sup>31</sup> “this radical redefinition of ‘salvation’” (p. 426), “this novel view” (p. 447), “truly bizarre and tragic” (p. 476), “innovative and novel views” (p. 751), “exegetical fallacies” (p. 751), and “twisting of Scripture” (p. 750).

### E. FAILURE TO PRESENT THE VIEWS OF OTHERS FAIRLY

Actually the author seems to do a fairly good job of representing the view of Reformed Lordship Salvation people who agree with him. However, when it comes to Free Grace people with whom he disagrees, he fails to take care in presenting their views.

An example of failing to present fairly the views of others is when he quotes Zane Hodges as using the words “flawed” and “extremely uncomfortable” and me as using the word “shutter” (p. 31). One or two word citations are not quotes. They are caricatures of a view. For example, if one looks up what I said in that context, I was not in any way saying that the “old gospel,” to use Stegall’s expression, causes me to shudder. What I actually said was this: “When I hear people point to 1 Cor 15:3-11 and boldly proclaim that is the precise evangelistic message Paul preached, I shutter (sic).” (Even in a later chapter devoted to that passage, he only gives a small part of my discussion about it. See pp. 529-89.)

Of course, Stegall sometimes gives more than a word or two snippet of what we said. Even then, however, though he *mentions* us often, he gives *detailed quotations* quite sparingly.<sup>32</sup> Unless the reader has read what we have written, he will come away with an inaccurate understanding of our view.

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<sup>31</sup> The author uses this expression to ridicule the supposed view of Zane Hodges. However, Hodges never referred to a *utopian* existence, eternal or otherwise.

<sup>32</sup> By *detailed quotations* I mean quotations which provide enough of the context (whether one sentence or multiple sentences) to make clear what the author is saying *and* his evidence for what he is saying.

## F. UNANSWERED QUESTIONS AROUND ABOUT WHAT ONE MUST BELIEVE TO BE BORN AGAIN

Precisely what one must believe about Jesus' deity, humanity, substitutionary death, and bodily resurrection to be born again? The author only elaborates when he is responding to questions I and other have raised.

When Stegall first started writing some of the articles that are included in this book, one only needed to believe in "His [Jesus'] genuine humanity" (p. 542). However, in response to a question I raised as to whether a person could be born again who believed that Jesus sinned, he added a new essential (p. 545). It is no longer enough to believe that Jesus was *genuinely human*. Now one must also believe He was sinless.<sup>33</sup>

Another example is that Stegall now says that "unless they come to believe that He [Jesus] is the 'I am'—equal to Yahweh God—they will remain spiritually dead, unregenerate, and unforgiven in their trespasses and sins" (p. 292). He is arguing this was true of Jesus' audience at that time, which is odd since elsewhere in this book he says that was not required, but that one simply had to believe what the publican of Luke 18:9-14 believed. He is also arguing one must believe that today.

Thus if someone believes that Jesus *is* Yahweh God, not that He is *equal to* Yahweh God, he would be unsaved. A modalist is one who believes that Jesus *is* God the Father and God the Holy Spirit and that there is but one person, not three persons, in God. Such a person cannot be born again.

I happen to believe that the term *Yahweh* in the OT sometimes refers to the preincarnate Christ and sometimes to God the Father. The "I am" of Exod 3:14 referred,

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<sup>33</sup> Clearly if a person could be born again while believing that Jesus was born of fornication, which Stegall says is possible since people are not always logically consistent (p. 739), then they could also be born again believing that Jesus, the God-Man, sinned. Indeed, it is hard to conceive of someone believing that Jesus was born of fornication (John 8:41) who believed that He was sinless.

in my view, to Jesus, not God the Father. That would seemingly bar me from eternal life since in Stegall's view to be born again one must believe that refers to God the Father and Jesus is simply "equal to" the Person who appeared to Moses at the burning bush.

There are many other essential truths which are going to emerge over the next few years as the author explains precisely what people must believe about each of these five points. Here are a few examples of new essentials that I believe will emerge:

1. Trinitarianism.
2. The eternity of Jesus.<sup>34</sup>
3. Jesus' substitutionary death does not *actually* take away the sins of the world (John 1:29).<sup>35</sup> His death only *potentially* does so.<sup>36</sup>
4. A person cannot be born again if he believes the ransom to Satan view of the atonement. Actually, he already says this in the book.<sup>37</sup>
5. A person with a Nestorian or Eutychian view of Jesus Christ cannot be born again.
6. A person must believe that the Second Coming has not occurred yet.<sup>38</sup>
7. It is not enough to believe all the essentials. One must also believe that his belief in all of the essentials are necessary for him to be born again.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> If someone believes that Jesus came into being when He was born in Bethlehem, and at conception He became both God and man, then would Stegall say that person is born again? Certainly not. The eternity of Jesus must be added if one must truly believe in the full deity of Jesus.

<sup>35</sup> See Stegall, *The Gospel*, 764 where he favorably cites Hixson.

<sup>36</sup> The Bible actually teaches that Jesus has already taken away the sins of the world (John 1:29) and that the world's sins have already been propitiated (1 John 2:2), whether anyone believes in Jesus or not.

<sup>37</sup> Stegall, *The Gospel*, 399-402.

<sup>38</sup> In Stegall's view, if a person believes that Jesus has returned and is somewhere on earth today, then he is believing in the wrong Jesus and is not yet born again.

<sup>39</sup> For example, all of Stegall's opponents believe the essential gospel truths he states, but none of them believe that their new birth was dependent on believing those truths. It is not enough to believe the essentials. To

8. Belief in the virgin birth is necessary to be born again.<sup>40</sup>
9. One must believe that Jesus is, was, and always will be immutable. He never changes.

Stegall's position logically requires that the unbeliever must be somewhat of an expert on Christology to be born again. How much of an expert? That is the moving target. That is why assurance is impossible for the author's position.

### G. THE VIRGIN BIRTH AND JESUS' RESURRECTION

I would have thought that the author would argue that belief in Jesus' virgin birth is an essential object of saving faith. Yet he says it is not. He takes over 40 pages to develop this one point (pp. 705-46). But his explanation is confusing since it seems to contradict his main thesis.

He argues:

If even the apostles could reject and deny such an essential truth as Christ's resurrection, at least initially, then surely some genuine but unfaithful Christians in our day could conceivably deny the virgin birth and be saved (p. 738).

Did you notice that Stegall says the apostles rejected and denied *an essential truth*? If they did, then would they not have been unregenerate? He fails to say that the apostles rejected and denied what is in his view an essential truth *today*, but which was not essential *prior to Calvary*. The evidence for such a view seems quite thin. But it gets worse.

Here Stegall opens Pandora's Box with an argument that contradicts his own position. Here is his argument laid out logically:

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be born again one must believe that belief in the essentials is necessary to be born again.

<sup>40</sup> I believe the author will end up changing his view on this issue since he will realize that it undercuts his entire position.

Major premise: The apostles were born again.

Minor premise: The apostles did not believe in Jesus' resurrection.

Conclusion: Thus people today need not believe in the virgin birth to be born again.

That conclusion is based on an unstated *a fortiori* argument. Stegall implicitly is saying that the resurrection of Jesus is a more fundamental truth than the virgin birth. While that could be debated (most fundamentalists consider them equally fundamental), let's grant his argument. Thus if a person could be born again and reject the more fundamental truth of the bodily resurrection of Jesus, then he could certainly be born again without believing the lesser truth of His virgin birth.

In the first place, if the apostles were born again by believing a different set of facts, then would it not be inappropriate to use them at all to discuss what people must believe today?

In the second place, even if it would be appropriate to use people who were supposedly born again by believing a different message, his conclusion is not the most direct. Another conclusion is more logically direct than the one he gives:

Major premise: The apostles were born again.

Minor premise: The apostles initially did not believe in Jesus' resurrection.

Conclusion: Thus people today need not believe in Jesus resurrection to be born again.

It seems to me that this is one of the best arguments that Stegall makes in his book. I heartily agree with his reasoning in this case. However, since he has inadvertently destroyed his whole case, this is one of the most glaring weaknesses in his book.

## H. THE AUTHOR SAYS GOD ALLOWS INCONSISTENCY— BUT HOW MUCH AND HOW DO WE KNOW?

A point that has been repeatedly made by myself, Zane Hodges, and others, is that people are often illogical and inconsistent in what they do and do not believe. For example, we've said that while it is unlikely that anyone today would believe in Jesus for eternal life who did not also believe that He died on the cross for his sins and rose bodily from the dead, we've said that the apostles show that such an inconsistency is possible. Yet Stegall insists that substitutionary atonement and Jesus' bodily resurrection are *essential* truths that must be believed to be born again. God allows no inconsistency here.

Seemingly, then, Stegall would also argue that one must believe in Jesus' burial and post-resurrection appearances since Paul indicates that they are part of the gospel that he preached to the Corinthians (1 Cor 15:1-11). Yet Stegall makes this fascinating comment:

However, Christians can be inconsistent, and thankfully God doesn't require complete theological consistency on our parts in order to be saved (p. 561).

How does Stegall know how much inconsistency God allows? Well, it is complicated since it takes him over 120 pages to discuss 1 Cor 15:1-11. However, the bottom line is that he sees certain gospel truths repeated together all the time, Jesus' death and resurrection, but not others, like His burial and His post-resurrection appearances. That leads him to conclude that the former are essentials and the latter are not.

God evidently requires "theological consistency" but not "*complete* theological consistency." That one statement makes assurance of one's eternal destiny impossible, for who can be sure that his level of theological consistency is great enough for him to clear the bar of saving faith?

Using his same reasoning, why couldn't we say that God allows people not to believe in Jesus' deity as one of

those inconsistencies? Or, why not say that God allows for people to have a *flawed* view of the deity of Christ (like Mormon's and JW's and children), as long as they believe the other essentials?

Basically tradition is the guide as to what is required and what is not. There is no Biblical warrant for what the author says one must believe and what the author says is permitted inconsistency.

### I. FAILURE TO DEAL ADEQUATELY WITH THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

Hodges, Niemelä, and many others have argued, persuasively in my opinion, that the Gospel of John is the place where the Lord Jesus gave us the saving message. I do not call it *the gospel* since the Lord Jesus never did and neither did His apostles. In fact, the word *gospel* doesn't even occur in the Fourth Gospel.<sup>41</sup>

If John's Gospel presents the message by which people in the Church Age are born again, then Stegall has a problem. For there are many examples in John, including the apostles themselves as Stegall himself acknowledges, who are held up as examples of what a person must believe to be born again, and yet they did not at that time believe in Jesus' death or resurrection or deity.

Surely if he gives over 100 pages to discuss 12 verses in First Corinthians (15:1-11), he should devote at least that many pages to discuss John's Gospel. Not quite. There is no chapter on John's Gospel. The closest he comes is in a relatively short (17 page) chapter entitled, "Is John 6:47 Really the Saving Message?" (pp. 82-98). And about seven of those 17 pages are devoted to material not in the Fourth Gospel (pp. 82, 85, 86, 91-93, 98). Thus in an 826 page

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<sup>41</sup> As an aside, another of the major flaws in Stegall's argument is that he fails to find a single place which says that the person who believes *the gospel* has everlasting life or is justified. If the gospel is the saving message, then we would expect to see such statements liberally spread throughout the NT.

book John's Gospel gets around 10 pages of attention.<sup>42</sup> This is an extreme mistake and shows that in his view the Gospel of John is not really for today. The Gospel of John for the author seems to be a history book of how people used to be born again during a previous Dispensation, but not how people may be born again today. Wait a minute. It can't be a history book of how people were born again before Calvary, because he says that prior to Calvary people did not need to believe in Jesus and that Luke 18:9-14 is the clearest passage on what people had to believe then. So it isn't clear what issue he thinks John's Gospel is addressing.

Luther thought that James contradicted Paul and thus he called James "a right strawy epistle." For Stegall the Fourth Gospel seems to be "a right strawy Gospel."

### **J. ELEVATING MATTHEW, MARK, AND LUKE TO EVANGELISTIC BOOKS**

It has long been a hallmark of the Free Grace position that the Synoptic Gospels are written to the Church for discipleship, not to unbelievers to tell them what they must believe to be born again. Stegall, however, believes that the Synoptic Gospels are evangelistic. Indeed, in a long and tedious discussion he attempts to prove that the titles of the four Gospels mean not that they are a genre of literature called *Gospel*, or Holy Biography, but instead that each presents the precise contents of saving faith, both for Israel, and for today (pp. 240-70). He writes,

Crossless advocates...insist that only the fourth Gospel is evangelistic in purpose. According to their view, this means that the Synoptics

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<sup>42</sup> It should be noted that there are four columns, or a page and a third, of references to the Gospel of John in the Scripture index. That is more than any other book, with several receiving three columns (Matthew, Luke, Acts, and Romans). However, this is very misleading. For example, First Corinthians gets only two columns, yet there are two chapters of over 120 pages that deal exclusively with 1 Cor 15:1-11. The references to John in the Scripture reference are, in most cases, not places where he discusses the texts. They are places where he cites texts in parentheses.

are merely edificational [sic]<sup>43</sup> in purpose and designed primarily for those who are already believers in Christ. The end result of such reasoning is that crossless proponents are now able to view the defining elements of Jesus' Messiahship in the Synoptics—His deity, humanity, death, and resurrection—as only necessary to believe for one's edification and sanctification, not for eternal salvation. One major problem with this view, however, is that these defining characteristics of "the Christ" are proclaimed primarily to *unbelievers* in the Synoptic Gospels. Therefore, the person and work of Christ [as found in the Synoptics] must be considered evangelistically necessary as the content of saving faith for *the lost* today.<sup>44</sup>

## K. ANATHEMATIZING ASSURANCE

Assurance receives very little attention in this book. According to the subject index he only refers to assurance on three pages (pp. 72, 98, 281), as well as dealing with false assurance on five other pages (pp. 86, 106, 133, 748-49). It is quite telling that in an 826 page book the author only has parts of three pages dealing with assurance. Of course, that is probably because he does not believe that assurance is of the essence of saving faith.

However, in reality on none of the three pages in which he uses the word *assurance* is he actually discussing *his view of assurance*! Amazingly on all three pages he is merely discussing the view of his opponents on assurance (cf. pp. 72, 98, 281).

And what does he think of his opponents view of assurance? He thinks it is *idolatry*. The following statements sound like something a Lordship Salvation proponent, not a Free Grace proponent, might say:

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<sup>43</sup> "Edificational" is another of the author's efforts to sound scholarly. Since there is no such word, the actual result is that he sounds *unscholarly*.

<sup>44</sup> Stegall, *The Gospel*. 626, italics his.

The imbalanced [sic] emphasis and requirement to believe in the message of eternal life, without even knowing who Jesus is or what He did to provide for that eternal life, has made a virtual *idol* out of the assurance of eternal life.<sup>45</sup>

...

It seems the message of eternal life and personal assurance has become the end-all and be-all of evangelism, the new god of the crossless, resurrectionless, deityless gospel.<sup>46</sup>

...

If there are no identifiable, necessary elements of the gospel to believe for one's eternal salvation, then haven't we arrived at the very subjectivity that Myers and other crossless advocates seek to avoid *in their quest for personal assurance of everlasting life?* Ironically, in the process of *seeking absolute assurance*, they have come full circle and actually undermined the very basis for it by their relativistic approach to defining "the gospel."<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 98, italics his.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 281, italics added. N.B. The author is quite confusing here. He argues that if assurance can't be found in being able to identify the precise number of essential gospel truths, then assurance is impossible. First, Myers advocates that assurance is possible by simply believing what the Lord Jesus said about the one who believes in Him having everlasting life that can never be lost (e.g., John 3:16; 4:14; 5:24; John 6:35, 37, 39, 47; 11:26). Myers's point in the material Stegall quoted is that trying to base one's assurance on being able to find a list of essential gospel truths makes it impossible to have assurance. Thus Stegall's argument here does not follow. Second, amazingly Stegall goes on to admit "that God in His infinite wisdom and sovereignty has chosen, for reasons undisclosed to us, not to provide a whole assortment of 'lists' that we would have preferred to see in Scripture" (p. 282). Stegall appears to be saying that God has not chosen to tell us precisely what we must believe to be born again since for him what we must believe to be born again—all of the essential gospel truths—is nowhere listed in the Bible. Hence he seems actually to be criticizing his own view of assurance here, for in his view, by his own admission, one is left with no anchor for assurance of his eternal destiny. .

This is not the first time in the book that Stegall distinguishes between what he calls *assurance* and what he calls *absolute assurance* (cf. p. 73). What is “absolute assurance”? That is certainty, is it not? Thus it sure sounds like Stegall believes in a different kind of assurance, something less than certainty. Of course, that is what Lordship Salvation speaks of, assurance, but not certainty. Once one loads up what one must believe to be born again, he ends up making true assurance, that is certainty, unlikely if not impossible.

Under Stegall’s complicated system, assurance, if understood as certainty of one’s eternal destiny, becomes impossible since no one knows if his belief in Jesus’ deity, humanity, death, and resurrection are sufficiently orthodox. One would always wonder, “Do I believe *everything* God says I must believe concerning the deity of Christ? Do I believe all that God requires regarding Jesus’ humanity? His substitutionary death? His bodily resurrection?”

Unless the Bible explains somewhere precisely what the minimum content of saving faith is on these issues, and it does not, then one is left with the sinking thought that only God knows precisely how much one must believe about these truths. None of us understands or believes everything the Bible says about complex subjects like the deity and humanity of Jesus Christ.

Of course, this is why we need pastors like the author. They can tell us precisely what we must believe. However, if they are forced to keep adding truths we must believe, then we begin to doubt that they have the answers.

For example, one blogger, Jonathan Perreault, a former member of Stegall’s church, has come to believe that Stegall leaves out an essential truth, the burial of Jesus (1 Cor 15:4a). He calls Stegall’s position *the groundless gospel*.<sup>48</sup> Another example is a Nebraska pastor who strongly agrees with Stegall on his essentials, but adds one more. A few years ago at our conference he told me that unless

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<sup>48</sup> See, for example, [freegracefreespeech.blogspot.com/2010/03/macarthu-rite-gets-gospel-right.html](http://freegracefreespeech.blogspot.com/2010/03/macarthu-rite-gets-gospel-right.html). Accessed July 29, 2010.

one believes that Jesus is currently *seated* at the right hand of God the Father, he is not born again. Of course, Jesus' seating is linked in the NT with His resurrection (e.g., Eph 2:6; Rev 3:21; though He did leave His Father's throne to meet Saul on the road to Damascus and He did stand when Stephen was martyred [Acts 7:56]).

Nowhere in this 826 page book does the author explain how one can have assurance of his eternal destiny.

Clearly if the author charges Zane Hodges and me with *idolatry* over assurance (p. 98) and with making assurance our *new god* (p. 98), then he certainly does not consider himself to be such an idolater. He does not believe that he overemphasizes assurance of one's eternal destiny. In this we heartily agree.

## L. STRANGE BEDFELLOWS WITH REFORMED THEOLOGIANS

Most of the people Stegall cites as supporting his views hold to Reformed Lordship Salvation. Before reading this book, I did not realize that.

As I read, it became more and more obvious that Stegall not only leans heavily on Reformed theologians to support his positions, he also reiterates many of their same objections to Zane Hodges and his Free Grace views. For example, Reformed theologian D.A. Carson wrote a book called *Exegetical Fallacies*. In that book he repeatedly criticized Zane Hodges for "many, many utterly novel (and, I fear, unconvincing) exegeses."<sup>49</sup> Amazingly, without giving Carson credit, Stegall writes:

It is precisely because Free Grace people did not yield to the innovative and *novel* views of Zane Hodges, but instead to Holy Scripture, that so many have stuck with 'traditional' Free Grace theology...

It is also likely that other on-looking evangelical Christians will take note of this trend of *exegetical fallacies*... (p. 751, italics added).

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<sup>49</sup>D.A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 129.

Since the Evangelical who coined the term *exegetical fallacies* and who wrote of Zane's *novel* views was Lordship Salvationist D. A. Carson, it appears that Stegall is saying that Lordship Salvation people actually proclaim the true saving message. It sounds like he is saying that a person could be born again by believing the message of Lordship Salvation.

In addition, like Carson and other Lordship Salvation teachers he laments,

If there is no repentance on the part of these teachers and leaders, and this process is allowed to continue, the toll of exegetical casualties will only rise, *as one classic gospel/salvation passage after another will be explained away as a "sanctification" passage* (p. 751).

Stegall seems much closer theologically to Reformed theologians than he does to Zane Hodges and other Free Grace theologians.

## M. MISUSE OF WORDS IN AN EFFORT TO SOUND SCHOLARLY<sup>50</sup>

While reading this book one is struck by the author's use of esoteric words like *deistic*, *devolving*,<sup>51</sup> *diachronic*, *guilted*, *parataxis*, and *hypotactic*. In some cases the words were used correctly, yet most readers will not know what Stegall means unless they consult a dictionary. In a few cases where he misuses words, the reader won't

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<sup>50</sup> In one place Stegall has a hybrid English Latin sentence in which he speaks of "justification *sola fide*" (p. 402), an unusual expression, to say the least. What he means is "justification by faith alone." By sticking some Latin in there to sound scholarly, he actually sounds unscholarly.

<sup>51</sup> Speaking of GES he says, "Things have changed for the worse in G.E.S. (sic) theology; they are *devolving* rather than improving." The word *devolving*, however, means to delegate or to transfer to another. There was an obsolete meaning of rolling downward, but the word is no longer used that way, and even if it were, that meaning does not fit his sentence: "they are [rolling downward] rather than improving" does not make too much sense.

know what he means if they do look up the words in the dictionary.<sup>52</sup>

**N. FAILING TO SHOW A SINGLE PASSAGE THAT  
SAYS THAT ONE MUST BELIEVE HIS  
ESSENTIALS TO BE BORN AGAIN**

Stegall admits that God nowhere lists the essential gospel truths: “God in His infinite wisdom and sovereignty has chosen, for reasons undisclosed to us, not to provide a whole assortment of ‘lists’ that we would have preferred to see in Scripture” (p. 282). Yet he does suggest that several passages contain most of what one must believe to be born again. Here is what he says about one of those passages: “1 Timothy 2:3-7 is one of the most decisive passages in the New Testament for determining the content of saving faith” (p. 394). He does not say that 1 Tim 2:3-7 states the object of saving faith. Instead, he says it is “one of the most decisive passages” to help us determine what that is. Yet none of those three passages he cites contains all of the elements he says are needed. Worse still for his case is that in none of those three texts are we told that one must believe the five essentials to be born again.

Stegall says just about the same thing about a second passage: “1 Corinthians 15:1-11 is still one of the most definitive texts in the entire Bible for determining the

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<sup>52</sup> For example, Stegall speaks of “the *deistic* meaning of ‘Savior’ in Acts 13:23” (p. 360, italics added), and the “*deistic* connotations in Acts 13:23” (p. 360, italics added). He seems to mean something like “Savior’ in Acts 13:23 means *God*,” and “the connotations of deity in Acts 13:23.” However, rather than going for the simple and clear, he chooses an esoteric word. Unfortunately, he was evidently unaware of the meaning of the word and hence he actually stated something quite different than what he surely meant. (He also misuses the word *deistic* on pp. 126, 652).

*Deistic* means *of or pertaining to deism*. Deism is that system of theology which teaches that God set things in motion and then let the world operate without any interference from him. Deists do not believe in divine revelation. And deists view Jesus Christ as a good man, but not as God in the flesh.

Thus what Stegall actually said about Acts 13:23 is that it teaches deism and that it supports deism’s view of Jesus Christ as a good man, but not God.

contents of the gospel that must be believed for eternal life (p. 479).<sup>53</sup> Note that again he does not say that 1 Cor 15:1-11 states what one must believe to have eternal life. It is rather “one of the most definitive texts” to help us find that answer.

By his own admission no one passage contains all the things one must believe to be born again. And nowhere in the NT are we told that if you combine a certain group of passages you come up with the entire list of things one must believe to be born again. So Stegall is left to try to guess what the essential truths are which must be believed to be born again.

If the author wishes people to adopt his view, then he needs to find the list which he says “God in His infinite wisdom and sovereignty has chosen...not to provide.” The author ultimately will need to reverse course and say that God has indeed given us the list of truths we must believe. Otherwise, he expects readers to believe the God has hidden the content of saving faith and that God does not want His children to be certain of their eternal destiny.

One of the reasons Stegall needed over 800 pages to explain and defend his view is because he can't find a text that states what we must believe to be saved. If he ever finds such a text, then he could explain and defend his view easily in a short booklet.

## **O. FAILING TO STUDY OBJECTIVELY THE NT USES OF EUANGELION AND EUANGELIZŌ, ESPECIALLY IN GALATIANS**

While answering the claim that the birth of Jesus is Bethlehem is part of the NT gospel message according to Luke 2:10, Stegall points out that the verb *euangelizō*, not the noun, *euangelion*, is used (p. 407). Then he goes on to say that both the noun and verb are often used of mere

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<sup>53</sup>This is part of the introductory material to Chap. 13, which is devoted to discussing that passage (pp. 480-579). A third passage that he includes as one of the most decisive and definitive texts in helping us find the content of saving faith is Acts 13:24-48 (pp. 336-80).

historical events that are *good news*, but are not part of the NT *gospel*.

Since for him *the gospel* is the message we must believe to be born again, things like *the gospel of the kingdom*, the good news that the kingdom of God was at hand, is not part of *the gospel*. Nor is the birth of Jesus or His forerunner, John the Baptist.

While this is a handy way to eliminate data that contradicts your position, the reasoning is circular. Anything he considers essential is *gospel*. Anything non-essential is not *gospel*, even if it called *gospel* by the NT writers.

A prime example of his methodology is his chapter entitled, "What Is the Gospel to the Galatians?" (pp. 335-80). After a few pages of introduction, the author asks where we can find Paul's *gospel* to the Galatians (p. 340). The normal procedure in determining what a word means in a given book is to examine its usage *in that book*. However, the author rejects that approach, suggesting that Gal 2:14-17 or 2:14-21 "was not Paul's *gospel* to the Galatians" (p. 342).

The term *gospel* is found seven times in Galatians. Yet none of those, in Stegall's view, tell us what Paul meant by the term *gospel*. Indeed, according to Stegall nowhere in Paul's defense of the *gospel* in Galatians does he explain what the *gospel* is. This conclusion is hard to believe.

But worse is the exegetical methodology that finds the author leaving Galatians to go to the Book of Acts to find out what Paul meant by the term *gospel* in Galatians. He leaves a book in which the term *gospel* appears seven times to go to a book in which it only appears twice (Acts 15:7; 20:24), and neither time in the section dealing with Paul's ministry in South Galatia.

This requires him to try to prove that the epistle to the Galatians was written to churches in Pisidian Antioch, Lystra, Derbe, and Iconium, churches in what was called *South Galatia*.

Then, assuming that is true, he goes to one sermon, Acts 13:24-41, in one of those four cities and picks out

what he thinks is the gospel. Stegall doesn't examine Paul's preaching in the other three cities of South Galatia mentioned in Acts 14. Never mind that the term *gospel* doesn't even appear in the one sermon he chooses to examine, or in all of Acts 13-14 for that matter.<sup>54</sup>

This is amazingly flawed exegesis.

## P. FAILING TO DEAL CAREFULLY WITH THE GOSPEL IN ROMANS

Stegall argues that the gospel of salvation<sup>55</sup> in Romans is “the message about how a guilty, condemned sinner can be freely justified in God's sight through faith alone in the Christ who died a propitious death for our sins and was raised for our justification” (p. 412).

What is remarkable is that Stegall does not mention, nor seems to notice, that neither the words *gospel* (*euangelion* or *euangelizō*) or *salvation* (*soteria* or *sozō*) appear anywhere in Rom 3:21–4:25, the justification section. How then is Paul's justification section in Romans called, *the gospel of salvation*?

The first use of the verb *euangelizō* in Romans is this: “I am ready to preach the gospel to you who are in Rome also” (Rom 1:15). Paul is referring to his desire to preach the gospel *to the believers in Rome*. How does this fit Stegall's view?<sup>56</sup> He doesn't say. He doesn't discuss Rom 1:15.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup>The verb *euangelizō* (“we proclaim glad tidings”) does occur in Acts 13:32, but Stegall does not even discuss that usage.

<sup>55</sup>Though he doesn't use that precise expression “the gospel of salvation” on the pages in which the following quote appears (see next note), he does convey that idea when he says that “the meaning of salvation and the meaning of the gospel [in Romans]” is being distorted by “the advocates of crossless saving faith” (p. 412).

<sup>56</sup>Indeed he says, “The gospel of Christ does not include information about how to be sanctified and live the Christian life” (pp. 412-13).

<sup>57</sup>He does have Rom 1:15 in a list detailing the uses of *euangelizō* in Romans (pp. 216, 412). But he never discusses it.

## **VI. RECOMMENDATION: BUYER BEWARE**

I applaud the author for his zeal, his bravery, and all the hard work he put into this book. Clearly he has given much of himself in the writing of this book. However, good intentions do not guarantee good results (cf. Jas 3:1).

Most people in the Free Grace movement, even many who agree with Stegall, would find this book to be offensive in tone and style, tedious to read, pedantic in style, and not too helpful for either evangelism or discipleship. Most will be disturbed by what he says about assurance of eternal life. In addition, most will be put off by the \$35 price tag, a very high price for a niche book. However, some in the Free Grace movement will nonetheless wish to have this book as a resource.