

# ZANE HODGES AND GES DID NOT CHANGE THE GOSPEL<sup>1</sup>

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Unless you have been hiding in a cave the last decade, you are familiar with the conflict in Free Grace circles over a supposed *crossless gospel*. Most of the people bringing the charge claim to have left GES because of a major shift in doctrine.

The alleged huge shift has been that Zane Hodges and Bob Wilkin and everyone in GES used to believe that at the moment of saving faith a person had to believe in the full deity of Jesus Christ, Jesus' substitutionary death, and His bodily resurrection from the dead, in addition to believing in the person of Christ alone, to be born again. According to these accusers, Hodges, Wilkin, and others in GES later veered off into proclaiming that anyone who believes in Jesus for eternal life is born again, regardless of how unorthodox their belief in the person and work of Jesus Christ might be. It is my contention that Hodges, Wilkin, and GES have always said that a person can be born again with deficient theology. In addition, I suggest that Hodges, Wilkin, and GES have never advocated a *bare minimum* method of evangelism (i.e., by giving people only a ten word statement, with no Biblical or doctrinal support).

Let's begin by reviewing some of the major accusations.

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<sup>1</sup>This article is adapted from a much longer message given by the author at the 2010 GES conference.

## II. THE ACCUSATIONS

### A. TOM STEGALL, *THE GOSPEL OF THE CHRIST*

Stegall observes,

It is my contention that...with the G.E.S. there has been an intentional doctrinal shift in the last decade or two—a radical change for the worse.<sup>2</sup>

He further contends:

There was once virtual unanimity among us who hold to the Free Grace position that in order for lost sinners to receive eternal life they *must* believe that Jesus Christ is God-incarnate who died for their sins and rose again to save them eternally.<sup>3</sup>

Stegall disapprovingly quotes Hodges: “Neither explicitly nor implicitly does the Gospel of John teach that a person must understand the cross to be saved. It just does not teach this.”<sup>4</sup> He also finds fault with this statement by Hodges: “The simple truth is that Jesus can be believed for eternal salvation apart from any detailed knowledge of what He did to provide it.”<sup>5</sup>

### B. THE 2009 “GRACE CONFERENCE,” LAKE ZURICH, IL

During a panel Q&A, a question was asked, “Do you have to believe in the deity, death, and resurrection of Christ to be eternally saved.”

All but one of the panelists basically said yes. Robert Lightner said you do not have to have a perfect understanding of those things, but you do have to believe them.

Earl Radmacher (known affectionately as Dr. R. by those of us who sat under his teaching) was last to speak

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<sup>2</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), 35.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 30, emphasis his.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 32.

and he alone disagreed. He responded to the other panelists saying, “Then you believe the Apostles were not saved.”<sup>6</sup>

Dr. R. then proceeded to demonstrate that the Apostles did not understand these things, yet they were saved.

James Scudder responded in this way:

You know never to disagree with Dr. Radmacher but I really believe that if I was in India and I just said, “Believe in Christ,” I think. . . they would just add Him to their [gods] as another god. And I truly think that we have to believe in the death, burial and resurrection.

And I agree with what he said about the Apostles because He hadn’t died yet and they really didn’t understand it, but they understand it later and that’s what they preached.

We’re going to have disagreements...<sup>7</sup>

### **C. FREE GRACE SEMINARY 2010 CONFERENCE**

At the 2010 Free Grace Seminary conference, I heard Dick Seymour deliver a message entitled, “Does It Matter What Jesus We Believe In?”

He was responding to the deserted island illustration given at the 2001 GES Conference by Zane Hodges (“How to Lead People to Christ, Part 1”).

Seymour was not arguing per se about the precise amount of information one must know about Jesus Christ (e.g., His virgin birth, deity, substitutionary death, sinless life, and bodily resurrection on the third day). Rather, his point was that one must believe in the Jesus of Scripture, and not some other Jesus. He seemed to think that Hodges was teaching that a person could be born again by believing in anyone named Jesus.

After the session I had a cordial conversation with him. I showed him several things Hodges said which show he

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<sup>6</sup>I was present and heard the panel and I personally transcribed this from the audio of the panel.

<sup>7</sup>Stegall, *The Gospel*, 32.

indeed believed and taught that one must believe in the Jesus of Scripture to be born again.

First, I showed Seymour a transcript I had made of the second message Hodges gave in 2001 on how to lead a person to Christ. I showed him these words by Hodges, “Now we are talking about the Jesus of the New Testament, not Jesus Espinoza who lives in the barrio of Los Angeles.”<sup>8</sup>

Second, I showed him the transcript of a message Hodges gave at the 2006 GES Conference called “The Spirit of the Antichrist.”<sup>9</sup> Referring back to the deserted island illustration Hodges said, “[The apostle] John is always at pains to point the believer to the historical Jesus as the Object of his faith.”<sup>10</sup>

He seemed surprised by Hodges’s statements insisting that one had to believe in the Jesus of the NT. He graciously asked that I email him a copy of the transcript so that he could further study Hodges’s comments.

#### **D. 2009 OPEN LETTER BY FRED LYBRAND**

Fred Lybrand, then President of the Free Grace Alliance (FGA), wrote a 37-page open letter on April 14, 2009, about “The GES Gospel.” It was addressed to Fred Chay, then President-Elect of the FGA, and to “The Community of Free Grace Advocates, Worldwide, *for the public*” (italics and capitalization his). From the start he makes it clear that he considers the position of Zane Hodges and GES to be what he calls a “Reformulation” of the gospel of Jesus Christ. He writes, in part:

The cross and resurrection are clearly unnecessary pieces of information for saving faith and eternal salvation in the GES Gospel view. And as any objective person can see,

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<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately this sentence did not end up in the version of the message published in JOTGES.

<sup>9</sup> Published in JOTGES, Autumn 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 42, italics added.

eventually this line of thinking will invade their presentation of the saving message...<sup>11</sup>

...

The one thing I hope that might be acknowledged by those representing the GES Gospel, is that they openly affirm that those of us who believe and teach that the ‘cross’ is necessary to understand and believe in order to be saved from hell to heaven—that we are not proclaiming the same gospel from eternal damnation that Zane Hodges and GES affirm. In simpler terms, we should all acknowledge that the GES Reformulation [sic] is clearly a different gospel than that which we who are classic Free Grace advocates affirm. I know for my own part, I do not believe the GES Gospel is the gospel by which anyone can be eternally saved. For some time the conversation has been misdirected with the claim that those who advocate the GES Gospel do preach the cross—which I do not doubt and will address in a moment—I say misdirected because what they openly preach is not what they insist one must BELIEVE [sic] in order to be eternally saved. In time however, if they continue on this present course, I don’t believe there is any intellectual reason for them to continue to include the cross, etc., in their gospel presentations.<sup>12</sup>

### III. NEITHER HODGES NOR GES CHANGED THEIR POSITION

I have spent hundreds of hours listening to Hodges’s videos, and especially the three deserted island messages. I assume that Stegall and Lybrand were not purposely misrepresenting Hodges in order to ruin his reputation. However, it quickly becomes apparent that Stegall was

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<sup>11</sup> See [freegracefreespeech.googlepages.com/GESGospel.LybrandOpenLetter.04-14-09.pdf](http://freegracefreespeech.googlepages.com/GESGospel.LybrandOpenLetter.04-14-09.pdf) (p. 1). Accessed June 3, 2010.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-3.

unfair in his citations. I think this is a very common error today, and isn't limited to the anti-GES crowd. We should be careful that we do not do the same thing when we deal with them or with anyone with whom we have an area of disagreement.

For decades, Hodges and GES have been at the forefront of opposition to what used to be called Lordship Salvation. It is my observation that this opposition was the only unifying factor which people have always agreed upon in the Free Grace camp. I have been a fan of Hodges since the mid 80s, and GES since the late 80s, and I never got the impression that everyone from GES had to agree on every issue. After studying everything I could find from Hodges, his stress was *always* on believing in Christ as the object of faith, for eternal life, and he *never* stated that a person had to also believe in Christ's death and resurrection in order to be born again. He *never* indicated that believing those truths was necessary to be born again.

In fact, I am not aware of a single verse in the entire Bible clearly stating what Stegall says about believing in Christ, plus His death and resurrection for eternal life. I have discussed this with several people who accuse Hodges of a crossless message, and they admit that there is no one passage that clearly states their message to unbelievers today. They claim that there is a pre-cross gospel, and a different post-cross gospel. They actually use those terms.

Hodges, Wilkin, and GES people *never* advocated omitting the cross in evangelistic conversations. The death and resurrection of Christ, and many other facts, are part of what Hodges called "the full gospel story" or "the normal context." He said that message should be shared in evangelistic presentations so as to move people to faith in Christ. I do not feel that there is adequate basis for Hodges's accusers to attack him based upon a supposed change in the object of saving faith. It is a very common view that the object of faith did not change. Of course there is progress of revelation, but that does not change

the object of saving faith, it only gives more detail about that object. Hodges and Wilkin are not the only ones who believe this. Hodges is very careful to insist on preaching and teaching the person and work of Christ to all unbelievers. The argument about the cross actually being the object of saving faith may be a debatable point among theologians. The grace view has always been that the object of faith is the person of Christ Himself, and not Christ plus anything else.

Has there ever been an unsaved person who came to Christ without deficiencies, holes, or flaws in their theology? Stegall agrees:

However, Christians can be inconsistent, and thankfully God doesn't require complete theological consistency on our parts in order to be saved.<sup>13</sup>

Without the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts to overcome our theological flaws, who would ever be saved? Is that not how people in the OT gained eternal salvation for thousands of years, until the end of the law, that is, until the death of Christ on the cross? Hodges was not saying that we should go around evangelizing like they did in the OT. That was not his point. He was saying that when we are doing evangelism, we should keep our “core objective” in mind, not in the sense that it is the *only* thing we say, but that a person can believe every word about Christ in the Bible, yet go to hell because they do not believe in the “core” of faith alone in the person of Jesus Christ for eternal life. Hodges's point was that we should allow solid grace theology to affect both the focus of our content and the goal we have in mind when doing evangelistic presentations. Hodges advocated giving people the “full gospel message” (lots of content), but he also urged that we *not forget to stress* the “core minimum,” that is, the invitation to believe in Jesus for the everlasting life that He promises to the believer.

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<sup>13</sup> Stegall, *The Gospel*, 561.

In order to stress this “core minimum” (the goal we should have in mind) Hodges proposed a strange scenario, where a guy on a deserted island reads John 6:43, and then John 6:47. He somehow becomes convinced (by the work of the Holy Spirit) through this small portion of the *written* Word of God to believe in the *living* Word of God, the Jesus of the NT for his everlasting life. It was a hypothetical scenario to demonstrate the “core minimum” we need to have in mind when we give the facts about the Christ to unsaved people. The scenario was not to demonstrate how Hodges or anybody else should now do evangelism. At the beginning of the first message Hodges stated, “I am not going to tell you how to do evangelism.” What was his point then? Hodges stressed that a person does not go to hell because they do not know enough sound doctrine. Many people will be in hell with impeccable Christology. A person will go to hell because he did not believe in Jesus Christ alone for his eternal salvation before his death. That is what Hodges meant by the “core minimum” and his observations that the text of Scripture nowhere requires a list of doctrines to be believed by the hearer in order to be born again. The object of our faith needs to be the person of Christ, and not a list of doctrines.

I will briefly examine some of Hodges’s writings from the 70s, 80s, and 90s to show that his view of the gospel never varied. Then I will move to comments he made at GES Conferences in 1997 and 1999, years before his remarks in 2000 that later caused so much controversy and led to charges of “reformulation.”

I begin with his first book. Its first publication was in 1972.

### **A. *THE HUNGRY INHERIT*, 1972**

The first printing of this book was by Moody Press way back in 1972. That was 28 years before Hodges’s two messages on “How to Lead People to Christ” at the 2000 GES Conference. Yet it was clear in this book that the object



of saving faith is Jesus' promise of everlasting life, not Jesus' deity, death, and resurrection.

The first and major aim of the book is a presentation of what Jesus told the woman at the well in John 4. Since Jesus did not tell the woman at the well about His deity or His coming substitutionary death or His coming bodily resurrection, Hodges clearly was saying in 1972 that the object of saving faith is the living water, the promise of life, not His person and work.

Note these words, intended to lead unbelievers today to faith in Christ:

Ignorant she had come, enlightened she had left.  
Empty she had arrived, full she had departed.  
The gift of God? She knew it now—eternal life  
inexhaustibly welling up within the heart! “Who  
is it that saith to thee, ‘Give me to drink’”? She  
knew *Him* now—the Christ, the Saviour of the  
world!<sup>14</sup>

## **B. *THE GOSPEL UNDER SIEGE*, 1981**

The same message is found here as was found in *The Hungry Inherit*. Once again the object of saving faith is Jesus' promise of everlasting life to the one who believes in Him for it.

Commenting on John 3:16, for instance, he wrote:

Assurance [of everlasting life] is precisely what one *should* find in them [the words of John 3:16]. There is no mention of works. Faith alone is the one condition upon which a man may acquire everlasting life. Moreover, this secures him from perishing. Indeed, if anyone who has ever trusted Jesus for everlasting life subsequently perished, the verse would be false. “Whoever believes” is as broad as it can possibly be and is wholly unqualified by any other stipulation.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Zane C. Hodges, *The Hungry Inherit* (Chicago, Moody Press, 1972), 20.

<sup>15</sup>Zane C. Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege* (Dallas, TX: Redención Viva, 1981), 18, italics his.

In the Epilogue of the book Hodges made this same point. The young man Jimmy, who lost his assurance in the Prologue, gets it back *by reading from the Gospel of John*.<sup>16</sup> And Hodges tells us the verses he read to get his assurance back: “Pretty soon he had read verses like John 1:12; 3:16; 4:10; and 5:24. As he did so his assurance and joy began to return.”<sup>17</sup> Of course, none of those verses mention the deity or resurrection of Jesus and only one, John 3:16, alludes to the cross, and that obliquely. Clearly Hodges held in 1981 what he held in 1972, that all who believe Jesus’ promise of everlasting life have it, regardless of how well developed their Christology is.

### **C. *JOURNAL OF THE GRACE EVANGELICAL SOCIETY,* AUTUMN 1990**

In only the third year of the Journal’s existence, Hodges wrote an article, “We Believe in Assurance of Salvation,” in which he stressed the view that assurance is of the essence of saving faith. In that article he brought out, once again, that the precise object of saving faith is Jesus’ promise of everlasting life to the believer.

Hodges cited John 20:30-31 and said, “From this declaration we may conclude that to ‘believe in Me’ means to ‘believe that Jesus is the Christ’” (p. 14). He then asks, “But what does that involve?” His answer is to point to Jesus’ words to Martha in John 11:25-26. He then says:

What is striking in all this is that our Lord’s claim to be the Guarantor of resurrection and everlasting life to every believer is met by Martha’s affirmation that Jesus is the “Christ.” Thus Martha’s declaration of faith is couched in precisely the terms used in the thematic statement of John 20:30-31. To believe that

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 124.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

“Jesus is the Christ” is what it means to “believe in Me.”<sup>18</sup>

Of course, this is familiar territory for Hodges. The object of faith is Jesus as the Guarantor of everlasting life and nothing more. Obviously Martha at this point did not believe that Jesus was going to die on the cross for her sins or that He was going to rise from the dead. She surely didn't yet believe He was God in the flesh. Yet she was born again. Hodges lifts her up as an example of what people today must believe to be born again, just as he had done 18 years earlier when he held up the woman at the well.

#### **D. GES CONFERENCE 1997: MESSAGE ON ASSURANCE**

Three years before Hodges gave two controversial messages, in which he supposedly changed his view of the gospel, he gave a message in which he discussed what the essential object of saving faith was.

He clearly implied here what he later made explicit:

...believing may have very little to do with the amount of evidence for what we believe. A person can believe that Elvis is alive, even though the evidence for that is presumably rather meager. The same goes for the idea of alien kidnappings. On the other hand, some people would argue that the idea of Republican and Democratic parties cooperating on something important does require a lot more proof than we have of that at the moment. In fact I have read recently that the budget talks have collapsed. But the fact remains that if a person thinks any of these things are true, he obviously believes them. Saving faith is really not any different from that. A person either believes the offer of eternal life, or he doesn't. It really isn't relevant how he came to believe it, or how good his reasons are for believing it. The

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<sup>18</sup>Zane C. Hodges, “We Believe in Assurance of Salvation,” *JOTGES*, Autumn 1990: 14.

issue is not how a person came to believe, but whether or not he does believe.<sup>19</sup>

Notice that the object of saving faith here, according to Hodges, is “the offer of eternal life.” And note that the object of saving faith is not that evidence which leads a person to believe the offer of eternal life.

This is the same message as the deserted island illustration.

### **E. PANEL DISCUSSION AT GES 1997 WITH HODGES, DILLOW, BING, AND WILKIN**

I will provide a portion of the Q & A time. This excerpt clearly shows what Wilkin and Hodges clearly held three years before Hodges’s supposed changing of the content of the gospel. They believed that the object of saving faith was Christ’s promise of eternal life, not what Jesus had to do to make eternal life available to everyone as a free gift.

Question: Could you elaborate on the content of the gospel that needs to be believed as far as who Christ is, and what is essential for salvation?<sup>20</sup>

Zane Hodges: Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God. What is the content of that? John 11:25 and 26, that He guarantees, that He is the Guarantor of eternal life and resurrection to everyone who believes. That’s the content. Now you can say to a person, “Do you believe that Jesus is the Christ?” And he might say yes, but not believe that he was himself saved. He hasn’t believed the content yet. You could say to a person, “Do you believe that everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God and on their way to heaven forever. He would have to say yes or no to that. If he said no, then of course he’s not saved. If he said yes and he

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<sup>19</sup>Zane C. Hodges. “Assurance Is of the Essence of Saving Faith.” I personally transcribed this from the audio of the message.

<sup>20</sup>I personally transcribed this question and all the discussion which follows from the audio of the panel.

understands what he is saying, he is saying, yes I am born of God, and I'm on my way to heaven.

Question: Another point, back to John 11, if you were talking about this, would you or how would you bring 1 Corinthians 15, where it seems you have...more of the content of the gospel: Christ died for our sins, and He rose. Would you [comment] on that?

Bob Wilkin: OK, let me just expand this question a little, because this one comes up a lot. In 1 Cor 15:3-9 Paul says that his gospel is the death, the burial, the resurrection, the appearances of Christ. And so the question comes up a lot, can you share the gospel without mentioning all those things? What if a person mentions the death and the burial of Christ but doesn't mention His resurrection? What if a person mentions the death of Christ, but not His burial? Or His resurrection, but not His appearances? Do you have to mention all those elements? And doesn't that create a problem because in the Gospel of John it seems the way Jesus shares the gospel, many times He never articulates His death or His resurrection, and yet He leads people to faith in Him? And the Gospel of John is written after Pentecost, to tell people how to be saved, so what gives here? Why do we have two different ways of articulating the gospel? Who would want to comment on that?<sup>21</sup>

Zane Hodges: I'll take a shot at it. I think what we need to distinguish between is what we might call the full gospel story and the bare minimum that one has to believe to be saved. There is no question that the full gospel story is how Jesus provided for salvation, and then what is the term or condition on which we receive it. And let me just say here, in all our experience in dealing

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<sup>21</sup> Note that Bob Wilkin is asking the question that three years later was answered in detail by Hodges's deserted island illustration. Clearly Wilkin in 1997 believed that the object of saving faith was Jesus' promise of everlasting life, not what He had to do to make that promise something He could fulfill.

with people shows, that when you are talking with them about a free gift which they only have to believe to be in possession of, they are going to say, “How can it be free?” And what is obviously the Biblical explanation of that and the one that works with people, if they are willing to believe the gospel, is that Christ paid for this. He made the total payment and therefore there’s nothing for us to pay and all we are asked to do is believe. That makes the offer of a free gift intelligible. I very much believe in preaching the cross to people. Because in the light of the cross alone do we really understand the freeness of salvation. But if you ask me what would I have to tell a person, if I had 2 minutes in the airport to do it, then I would probably tell them what we have in John 11:25 and 26. So I think we can say, yeah, Paul is talking about the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15 but he’s not necessarily talking about the bare minimum which it is necessary to believe in order to be saved. We want to begin the gospel in eternity past, and the birth of Christ, the Virgin birth is part of the gospel story if we expand it. But I am not going to tell a person that unless they believe the virgin birth then they are not going to be saved. However that helps to explain how God has provided salvation.

Charlie Bing: I would say in terms of what Christ said in John 11 that you quoted, a lot of theology is implied, like to be a Guarantor of our eternal life, He needs to be a living Savior—even though it might not be preached explicitly as Paul chooses to do in 1 Corinthians 15. And certainly implied to a person, logically I think he needs to derive that conclusion. So the conclusion is that he is a sinner and needs that salvation. So there’s a lot implied and I think it is tricky to boil it down to a minimum.

Jody Dillow: I was going to say in China it is a common issue if you started out with a typical Chinese, “God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life,” you’re already in trouble because

many don't even believe in God. Those who do have a completely different concept of God. Some of them are polytheistic. Typically there is an Eastern pantheism of some kind. So you really have to have a 5 spiritual laws. You start into a discussion typically in evangelism about the nature of God: Who it is you are approaching to have fellowship with Him? I am saying the same thing you said, Bob.

Zane Hodges: It seems to me also that even in this country, every individual is a law unto himself. So that if I am talking to Mr. X, I need to tell Mr. X everything that will enable him to understand the offer of salvation. If I am talking to Mrs. Y, I've got to tell her everything that will be necessary for her to understand salvation. I may have to say less to Mrs. Y than I say to Mr. X in order to bring that comprehension. The point I think that we all agree we are getting at, no matter what culture you are in, you have to give them enough Biblical information so that they understand the Biblical offer.

Note carefully that last paragraph. Hodges clearly indicates there that it takes different content with different people to get them to the point of believing what he calls *the Biblical offer*. He is clearly speaking of Jesus' offer of everlasting life. The giver of the gift is the object of saving faith.

## **F. COMMENTS BY HODGES ON PANEL DISCUSSION AT GES 1999**

Two years later, at the 1999 GES conference, on a panel with John Hart, Earl Radmacher, and Charlie Bing, Zane Hodges made this point clearly once again:

Zane Hodges: The NT does articulate in terms of something that we can believe: "These are written that you might believe that, THAT Jesus is the Christ, and that believing you might have life through His name." First John 5:1 says, "Everyone

that believes Jesus is the Christ is born of God.”

Now what does it mean to believe that Jesus is the Christ? Well I think obviously it means to believe that He is the one who gives to every believer eternal life. “I am the resurrection and the life, he that liveth and believeth in Me, though he were dead, yet will he live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die.” And then He says to Martha, “Do you believe this?” And notice that what He said is first of all I am the One who is the source of resurrection and eternal life to everyone who believes in Me. And if you believe this, Martha, then you have said that I am that person, and you have the guarantee of resurrection and eternal life.<sup>22</sup>

## **G. REMINISCENCE BY HODGES DURING GES 2000 MESSAGE**

In the first of his two-part message entitled, “How to Lead People to Christ,” Hodges indicated that the view he was then advocating he had held all the way back in the mid 50s. He was a student at Dallas Seminary from 1954-58. Here he relates an incident that occurred over 50 years ago now:

Years ago, as a student at Dallas Theological Seminary, I washed dishes in the dining hall to pay for my meals. Often after I had finished this chore I hung around and talked theology with another student who swept up the kitchen every night. One night this student made a statement to me that I have never forgotten. He said something like this, “I know that I trusted Christ for salvation before I realized that Jesus was the Son of God.” I was surprised because I had never heard anyone say this before.

But I did not quarrel with that statement then, nor would I quarrel with it now. It is the name of Jesus that brings salvation whenever anyone

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<sup>22</sup>I personally transcribed this from the audio of the message.



believes in that name as his or her sure hope of eternal well-being. 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.<sup>23</sup>

## IV. MY ANALYSIS

### A. HODGES'S METHOD AND STYLE

Hodges tailored his speaking style to his intended audience. When he would speak at church he used simple terminology and would assume very little on the part of the hearers. However, when he spoke or wrote for GES, he assumed a high level of Biblical knowledge on the part of his hearers. I think he seemed to assume people were tracking with him, so he did not spend a lot of time on background material and defining terms.

Hodges appealed to Scripture as his authority. He sought to base his arguments on explicit arguments from Scripture, which he used to explain other passages that were not clear. In other words, there are some crystal clear passages in the Bible, which set the boundaries for all other passages dealing with related subjects. This is actually a common hermeneutical principal, and Hodges is not doing something unusual here.

In Q&A times at GES people often asked Hodges questions which could not be answered from Scripture. He often said "I don't know," sometimes following up by saying, "In my opinion," and then giving what he thought likely in light of his understanding of Scripture. He did this to show that he did not feel the Scriptures were clear on the point in question. People seem to have an insatiable desire to get leaders to make authoritative pronouncements from the text of Scripture about things

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<sup>23</sup>Zane C. Hodges, "How to Lead People to Christ, Part 1: The Content of Our Message," *JOTGES* (Autumn 2000), 5.

it does not explicitly teach. Hodges never hesitated to say, “I don’t know.”

Hodges did not speak at GES as if it was a hostile audience. He assumed that GES audiences were tracking with the teaching from him, Bob Wilkin, and other GES speakers.

Hodges was assuming that his hearers shared his view that the Scriptures should be used on a regular basis to clarify, correct, and/or refine our views. The Bible is our sole authority. Hodges operated from the assumption that we need to analyze our theology based upon what the Scriptures say, and we should not hold as authoritative the traditional understandings which we have.

All of Hodges’s statements, especially those in his papers on “How to Lead People to Christ,” need to be examined in light of his main points. He would often embellish his papers, while he read them, in order to clarify his main points and to answer questions ahead of time. This worked most of the time, but often, people still did not get his main points, and they still tripped up on the concepts that were new or unfamiliar to them.

At GES conferences, Hodges was being a seminary professor and challenging our thinking instead of spoon-feeding us. He expected us to take his observations and study the Scriptures for ourselves, and not to take every word he said and start preaching it in church when we got back from GES. Hodges assumed he could present non-traditional concepts at GES, and that people had the ability to check them out on their own and either accept them, or else agree to disagree with him. He did not expect people to accept everything he said at GES conferences as infallible.

## **B. ASSESSMENT OF THE ACCUSATIONS**

Hodges did not change his theology to the degree his crossless accusers indicate. His accusers seem to imply that it was wrong for him to refine *anything* when deal-

ing with salvation issues. However, the Grace movement has always been solidly based upon studying the text for what it says and does not say, and based upon that study, making corrections to traditional views. The Grace movement would quickly die if we stopped studying the Bible inductively and never grew and developed in our understanding of Biblical truths.

Hodges believed in the precedence of Biblical Theology over and above Systematic Theology. In the Bible departments of the excellent schools I have attended, there was always a tension (sometimes healthy, sometimes not) between the Bible Department and the Theology Department. Each one thought their department should correct the other. This cannot be true. Someone or something has to be the authority, and according to Paul, the Bereans were correct in checking out everything by studying the text of OT Scriptures to correct Paul if need be.

In my opinion, the greatest change in Hodges's theology over the years was his position that repentance means more than simply a change of mind. This and other changes (e.g., the outer darkness in Matthew, the chair illustration and the explanation of faith, the understanding of the word *salvation*) were adjustments or refinements, based upon careful, inductive study of the text. But this does not constitute heretical teaching.

Hodges never deviated from key assumptions held by the Grace Movement since the mid 80s. He held to the careful examination of the Scripture to determine whether a text was speaking of justification issues or discipleship issues. The failure to distinguish which passages are directed to unbelievers and which are directed to believers is the basis for many of the errors of Perseverance Theology. For example, whenever the words *saved* or *salvation* are used, he would ask what type of deliverance was in view, rather than make the reductionistic error of assuming the passages always referred to salvation from eternal condemnation.

Almost all of the Free Grace teachings about the simplicity of faith are based upon what is not included in the clear verses in the Gospel of John such as John 3:16. For example, John 3:16 does not say “whosoever believes in Him and perseveres to the end of his life in good works has everlasting life.” The addition of requirements to “whoever believes in Him” is normally called “an argument from silence.” But if there were codicils, provisos, or hidden stipulations, then John is badly misleading the reader. (Note: These additions are usually added to *invalidate* a person’s faith by those who believe in Reformed Perseverance Theology. Do we really want to go down that road?) In other words, these people would ask a person questions like, “Did you really believe?” “Did you repent of your sins?” “Did you promise to obey God for the rest of your life?”

From the beginning Hodges held and taught that John’s Gospel is the authority, containing clear passages for the teaching that one believes in Christ for everlasting life. Of the some 98 times that the word *pistis* and *pisteuō* are used in John, many times the text specifically calls for a person to believe in Jesus for everlasting life. In most of the other texts, eternal life is implied.

Going back to his 1972 book *The Hungry Inherit*, Hodges held up the Gospel of John as the only book written with the express goal of leading a person to believe in Jesus as the Christ, resulting in eternal salvation. This is a very common view and is recognized by all Biblical scholars, not just Hodges or Grace people. If there were codicils, provisos, and hidden stipulations, which are in addition to believing in Jesus as the Christ, then it is very strange that John does not mention them in his book.

Obviously many disagree with exactly how people were saved in the OT, but Hodges repeatedly stressed over the years that OT people had to believe in a person, the coming Messiah, and not a set of facts. Until Jesus came, this faith looked forward, now this faith looks backward to Jesus who came as the OT Messiah, and who demon-

strated that He was the Christ. The facts about the object changed, but the object stayed the same.

Hodges suggested that clear passages such as John 3:16, 5:24, 6:47, and 1 Tim 1:16, teach that simple faith in Christ brings eternal life. One cannot add anything to that simple faith alone in the person of Christ alone for eternal life, as described in John, and 1 Tim 1:16, because otherwise he would never know exactly how much he would have to add to faith in Christ in order to have that life. The uncertainty of exactly what has to be added to faith effectively eliminates the possibility of knowing for sure that you have everlasting life, which is a crucial part of saving faith.

If a person believes in Christ for everlasting life, Hodges argued, then at least at *that* point in time, he is sure of his eternal destiny. The promise of eternal life, according to Zane Hodges, is what we believe in Christ for. Believing in Jesus as the “Guarantor of eternal life”—one of his favorite expressions—means we are not believing in ourselves as the guarantor of it. Eternal life cannot be lost by living badly, because we did not get it by behaving well.

Hodges always taught that the examples that Jesus gives in the Gospel of John are the clearest source of evangelism examples today. Other passages can be used, but they should be used in conjunction with the clear teaching of the Gospel of John. When witnessing to unbelievers, passages should be used which demonstrate very clearly that a person needs simple faith in the person of Jesus for the everlasting life He has made available.

### **C. ADMITTEDLY HODGES COULD HAVE BEEN CLEARER ON SOME POINTS**

If Grace theology is going to continue to move forward until Jesus returns, we must continue to do the work of studying the Scriptures. We cannot and will not rest on the work done by Hodges and others, assuming that no corrections are needed. Hodges taught us otherwise. Thus

with great respect for him, I point out a few areas where I feel we need to *correct* or modify what Hodges taught.

### *1. Questioning Hodges's deserted island illustration*

Hodges's deserted island illustration was a bit difficult for people to grasp. People thought Hodges was saying that we should evangelize using some sort of new "bare minimum" evangelistic presentation, but I do not believe this conclusion is warranted.

Perhaps Hodges could have used a different illustration, and possibly a more traditional evangelistic passage such as John 3:10-15. Illustrations often seem to break down. It might have been better had he not used any illustration at all!

It is difficult, if not impossible, to illustrate the least amount of content that God is able to use in order to convince a person to believe in Jesus Christ for their everlasting life. You cannot objectively prove all of the things that a person does not have to believe.<sup>24</sup> The Bible only states the moment of saving faith in terms of what we have to believe. Perhaps Hodges could have provided a number of examples of people who had deficiencies, flaws, or holes in their theology at the moment they believed in Christ for eternal life.

Hodges should have spent more time emphasizing the perspicuity and the inspiration of Scripture, including the words of John 6:43 and 47. He should have spent more time emphasizing that it is not our dynamism or persuasiveness, but the Holy Spirit's work that causes people to be convinced to believe in Jesus.

He needed to spend more time explaining what he meant by "core" or "bare minimum." I think he should have used a term such as *sine-qua-non*, rather than "core" or "bare minimum."

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<sup>24</sup> Editor's note: If there are Biblical examples of people who believed in Jesus for eternal life and yet who did not believe in certain other truths, then we can indeed prove that those other beliefs are not required.

## 2. Questioning Hodges's use of the term *gospel*

Hodges's use of the word *gospel* was confusing since he used it in two different senses. A person could easily misunderstand which sense he meant, if they were not "tracking" with him.

Sometimes he used the word *gospel* in the sense of the sine-qua-non of what one must believe for everlasting life. This is what Hodges was referring to when he said, "All forms of the gospel that require greater content to faith in Christ than the Gospel of John requires are flawed." He was not suggesting that if you tell people about the cross when you evangelize then your presentation is flawed, because he later insists in the same message that we should tell everybody about the cross when we evangelize. His point was that since in John's Gospel the precise object of faith, the sine-qua-non, was Jesus' promise of everlasting life to the believer, then if we add to the person of Christ as the precise object of our faith, then we are distorting what the Lord Himself said.

Yet often in the same message Hodges used the word *gospel* to refer to all of the information about who Jesus was and what He did as a basis for His offer of eternal life based upon faith alone in Him. Hodges referred to this in statements such as "I at the same time give them the full gospel message and the bare minimum." This "full gospel message" was not what he was referring to when he said, "All forms of the gospel that require greater content to faith in Christ than the Gospel of John requires are flawed."

Technically, both of those statements refer to *content* because there are texts of Scripture that teach both.

In other words, Hodges used *gospel* both to refer to the proposition that we need to believe in order to have everlasting life and to refer to dozens of Biblical truths about the person and work of Jesus that God uses to lead people to believe the saving proposition. That is, of course, potentially quite confusing, especially since the latter content

can be different for each person we talk to, depending upon how knowledgeable they are of the Scriptures.

Hodges is not the only one who uses the word *gospel* in more than one sense. It is difficult to define the term every time it is used. However, we should be careful that our hearers know what we are talking about when we use the term *gospel*.

### *3. Questioning Hodges's explanation of the two-step approach*

Hodges's point about a two-step approach to faith could be easily misunderstood by his crossless accusers.

Some of these accusers think that *trust* is a better term than *believe*. Hodges was always careful to insist that *trust* can be used as long as it is not used exclusively, thinking it to be a better term than *believe*, which would suggest that more is needed beyond simple belief. There are a few meanings of trust which are synonymous with the word *believe*, so if our hearers know when we use the word *trust*, we really mean *believe*, then the terms could be interchangeable.

Hodges's statement that step one is "believing the facts," and step two "deciding to trust in Christ" could be misunderstood as saying that the facts are unnecessary to give people in evangelistic presentations. In other words, they think he was "uncoupling" the truths about Christ from faith in the person of Christ making them "excess baggage" in the evangelistic presentation. This was *not* his point.

Hodges held to the view that since "believe" means to be persuaded or convinced that something is true, then you cannot really decide to believe. In other words, he was saying that a person is not saved by deciding to trust Christ. His point was that a second step (i.e., deciding to trust) confuses the simplicity of faith alone in Christ alone.

Instead of "deciding to trust Christ" as being the second step, Hodges was saying that normally a person comes to



faith during the first step, while they are being exposed to the truths about Christ. He was not advocating giving people no truths at all, nor was he suggesting we uncouple them from the evangelistic presentation we give to people. The truths are not the object of faith. The truths point to the person of Christ as the true object of saving faith, and a person is saved the moment they believe in Jesus for everlasting life, right where they sit or stand.

#### 4. *Murky “excess baggage”*

Hodges could be misunderstood to be saying that all of the truths about Christ, such as His death and resurrection, were “excess baggage.” But he did not consider these and others truths about Christ to be “excess baggage.” He was referring to the time when, as a child, he went forward and prayed a prayer to become a Christian, before he understood what he was doing. The “excess baggage” would be things like raising a hand, praying a prayer, going forward, etc.

#### 5. *Failure to distinguish between one-on-one and group evangelism*

I think Hodges could have clarified that the idea of “core minimum” might be applicable in the case of personal evangelism, rather than in preaching to groups of people.

Hodges should have emphasized that the idea of a “core minimum” really does not have anything to do with how much content you give in an evangelistic message to a crowd. That is because an evangelist preaching to a crowd needs to custom tailor the information to be preached about the person and work of Christ to the kind of audience he has. The core minimum would still be the same, which would be some sort of closing statement that probes whether the people in the audience understand and believe that Jesus gives everlasting life to those who believe in Him for it.

Many of Hodges’s crossless accusers are pastors and/or preachers, and I think they thought that he was talking about how they should reduce the amount of truth that

a person needs to preach about Christ in their sermons. That was not his point.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Satan surely loves the prospect of fracturing the Free Grace movement. Thus we should take pains, while not compromising our beliefs, to edify rather than hurt one another.

It is helpful if we realize the intensity of the emotions in the crossless accusations and that some people feel threatened by change.

The argument has been festering for years now. The lines have been drawn, and the intensity of the argument seems to shut down true constructive dialogue.

For many people, there is more at stake than just a “view.” If some of these crossless accusers changed their view, and challenged traditional views, they could lose their jobs, their reputations, or their donor base.

Realize that those of us who are “tracking” with Hodges, Wilkin, and other GES speakers and writers are truly blessed by God. We need to be understanding toward those who view many of the teachings of Hodges and Wilkin as a threat. Some folks may not feel they have the freedom to rethink traditional views, and to change their views.

We should challenge fellow Free Grace believers to adopt an approach to evangelism that involves genuine dialogue with people, rather than having a scripted evangelism approach. Zane Hodges encouraged us to customize the quantity of truths we share about Christ based upon how much the person to whom we are speaking already knows and believes. We also need to vary the amount of truth that we give a person based upon how close they are to the point of being persuaded or convinced that they get eternal life by faith alone in Christ alone.

Hodges was espousing the method of giving them as much information about the person and work of Christ as is necessary to convince them that Jesus gives everlasting life to all who believe in Him for it. He was not advocating some sort of memorized presentation ending with a call for a decision to trust in Christ.

We should develop a good attitude toward those with whom we disagree. Recognize that some who only recently have voiced their concerns about Hodges and GES have actually disagreed with the main points of what GES has stood from the beginning. For example, Stegall wrote, “There was once virtual unanimity among us who hold to the Free Grace position that in order for lost sinners to receive eternal life they *must* believe that Jesus Christ is God-incarnate who died for their sins and rose again to save them eternally.”<sup>25</sup> Yet this was never GES’s position in its newsletter, Journal, books, commentaries, or conferences.

The change is not in what Hodges and GES were saying about the saving message.<sup>26</sup> Rather, the change is that some of the listeners finally paid more attention to what was said. For example, when Hodges and Wilkin called people to simply believe in Jesus for eternal life, some must have assumed that they meant that a person had to believe in Christ *plus believe additional facts about Him*. Since they thought belief in Christ alone for eternal life as the object of one’s faith is invalid unless the believer also has a sort of “bare minimum” level of theological understanding, with an emphasis on the cross, they assumed Hodges and Wilkin did as well, even though they never said that.

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<sup>25</sup> Stegall, *The Gospel*, 30.

<sup>26</sup> Editor’s Note: In 2005 GES admittedly changed our Affirmations of Belief. We added under “assurance” the fact that assurance is of the essence of saving faith. However this was not a *change* in doctrine for us as this article shows. Rather, it was explicitly stating something we had been teaching since the early years of GES (and well before GES even began in the case of Hodges).

I think it unwise to try to answer questions such as, “Does a person have to believe in the deity of Christ, or the cross, to be saved?” They are asking a question that cannot be answered by a simple “Yes” or “No.” The answer is that a person does not have to have perfect theology to be saved, and in the Church Age the truths about the person and work of Christ are the normal contexts which direct a person to believe in Him for everlasting life.

Show an attitude of love towards those who are confused about what the Bible really says. Like Zane Hodges, we should seek to help people understand and believe what God has said.