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“Faith Alone in Christ Alone”

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A REVIEW OF THOMAS STEGALL'S *THE GOSPEL OF THE CHRIST*¹

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 about people in the Free Grace movement, like Zane Hodges, John Niemelä, René López, and Bob Wilkin, who have been masquerading as Free Grace proponents, but 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).

¹Thomas 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. ²

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,³ 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 mentions GES but not Grace Evangelical Society.⁴

² 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).

³ 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.

⁴ 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.⁵ There are 16 variations used of the expression *the crossless gospel*, including: the unmodified expression *the crossless gospel*,⁶ and a host of modified versions: *the new crossless gospel*,⁷ *today's new crossless gospel*,⁸ *today's crossless gospel*,⁹ *crossless gospel advocates*,¹⁰ *crossless gospel teachers*,¹¹ *crossless gospel proponents*,¹² *crossless gospel exegetes*,¹³ *the crossless gospel position*,¹⁴ *the crossless gospel's doctrine*,¹⁵ *the crossless gospel conclusion*,¹⁶ *the crossless gospel approach*,¹⁷ *the crossless, resurrectionless gospel*,¹⁸ *the crossless gospel interpretation*,¹⁹ *today's crossless, deityless gospel*,²⁰ and *a crossless, resurrectionless version of the gospel*.²¹ The

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

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

⁷ *Ibid.*, 72, 377, 564, 596.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 82, 454.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 198, 377, 532, 547, 602, 621.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 41, 213, 530.

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

¹³ *Ibid.*, 447.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 129, 379, 416, 507, 510, 555, 614, 623, 652.

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

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 424.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 533.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 506, 654.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 506.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 608.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 511.

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

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.”²³ 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.

²²These 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. 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).

²³*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.²⁴ 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 unashamedly

²⁴If 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.

refers repeatedly in this book to *tradition* as proof that his view is correct.²⁵ 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.²⁶ 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

²⁵ 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..."

²⁶ 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"), and 87 ("this new view").

order to be born again. But is this what it means Biblically to believe in Christ? Can anyone know with certainty what God requires?

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.²⁷

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

²⁷ 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 of 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.

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?

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.”²⁸

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.²⁹

It should be noted, however, that the Lord might not be referring to forensic justification in Luke 18:9-14. There is

²⁸ Stegall, *The Gospel*, 183.

²⁹ 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.

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

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”

³⁰ 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.

(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. 396),³¹ “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 fairly present 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 [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.³² Unless the reader has read what we have writ-

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

³² 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.

ten, he will come away with an inaccurate understanding of our view.

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

Precisely what must one 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.³³

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.

³³ 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.

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, 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.³⁴
3. Jesus’ substitutionary death does not *actually* take away the sins of the world (John 1:29).³⁵ His death only *potentially* does so.³⁶
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.³⁷
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.³⁸

³⁴ 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.

³⁵ See Stegall, *The Gospel*, 764 where he favorably cites Hixson.

³⁶ 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.

³⁷ Stegall, *The Gospel*, 399-402.

³⁸ 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.

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.³⁹
8. Belief in the virgin birth is necessary to be born again.⁴⁰
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*

³⁹ 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 be born again one must believe that belief in the essentials is necessary to receive eternal life.

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

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:

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 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, such as 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.⁴¹

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

⁴¹ 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.

the apostles themselves as Stegall acknowledges, who are held up as examples of what a person must believe to be born again, and yet 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 1 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 book John's Gospel gets around 10 pages of attention.⁴² 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."

⁴² 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, 1 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.

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 are merely edificational [sic]⁴³ 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.⁴⁴

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

⁴³ "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*.

⁴⁴ Stegall, *The Gospel*, 626, italics his.

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, none of the three pages in which he uses the word *assurance* contain *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:

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.⁴⁵

...

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.⁴⁶

...

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

⁴⁵ Ibid., 98, italics his.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

it by their relativistic approach to defining “the gospel.”⁴⁷

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

⁴⁷ *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.

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*.⁴⁸ 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 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.

⁴⁸ See, for example, freegracefreespeech.blogspot.com/2010/03/macarthu-rite-gets-gospel-right.html. Accessed July 29, 2010.

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.”⁴⁹ 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).

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.

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

M. MISUSE OF WORDS IN AN EFFORT TO SOUND SCHOLARLY⁵⁰

While reading this book one is struck by the author's use of esoteric words like *deistic*, *devolving*,⁵¹ *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 know what he means if they do look up the words in the dictionary.⁵²

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:

⁵⁰ 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.

⁵¹ 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.

⁵² 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.

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 the three passages he cites contains all of the elements he says are needed.

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 contents of the gospel that must be believed for eternal life (p. 479).⁵³ 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.

⁵³This 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).

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 in 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 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 goods 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 is 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.⁵⁴

This is amazingly flawed exegesis.

P. FAILING TO DEAL CAREFULLY WITH THE GOSPEL IN ROMANS

Stegall argues that the gospel of salvation⁵⁵ 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).

⁵⁴The verb *euangelizō* does occur in Acts 13:32 ("we proclaim glad tidings"), but Stegall does not even discuss that usage.

⁵⁵Though 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).

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?⁵⁶ He doesn't say. He doesn't discuss Rom 1:15.⁵⁷

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.

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

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

ZANE HODGES AND GES DID NOT CHANGE THE GOSPEL¹

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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.

¹This 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.²

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.³

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.”⁴ 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.”⁵

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

²Thomas 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.

³Ibid., 30, emphasis his.

⁴Ibid., 31.

⁵Ibid., 32.

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

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...⁷

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 2000 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

⁶I was present and heard the panel and I personally transcribed this from the audio of the panel.

⁷Stegall, *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 2000 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.”⁸

Second, I showed him the transcript of a message Hodges gave at the 2001 GES Conference called “The Spirit of the Antichrist.”⁹ 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.*”¹⁰

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,

⁸ Unfortunately this sentence did not end up in the version of the message published in *JOTGES*.

⁹ Published in *JOTGES*, Autumn 2007.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 42, italics added.

eventually this line of thinking will invade their presentation of the saving message...¹¹

...

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.¹²

III. NEITHER HODGES NOR GES CHANGED THEIR POSITION

I have spent hundreds of hours listening to messages given by Zane Hodges, and especially to 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 unfair in his citations. I think this is

¹¹ See fredlybrand.org/Products. Accessed June 3, 2010.

¹² *Ibid.*, 2-3.

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 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.¹³

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.

¹³ 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!¹⁴

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, Hodges 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.¹⁵

¹⁴Zane C. Hodges, *The Hungry Inherit* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), 20.

¹⁵Zane 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*.¹⁶ 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.”¹⁷ 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

¹⁶Ibid., 124.

¹⁷Ibid.

“Jesus is the Christ” is what it means to “believe in Me.”¹⁸

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

¹⁸Zane C. Hodges, “We Believe in Assurance of Salvation,” *JOTGES*, 3 (Autumn 1990): 14.

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

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?²⁰

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

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

²⁰I 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?²¹

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

²¹ 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.²²

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

²²I 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.²³

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

²³Zane C. Hodges, "How to Lead People to Christ, Part 1: The Content of Our Message," *JOTGES* 13 (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 dealing

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

demonstrated 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.²⁴ 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."

²⁴ 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, 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 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.

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 for 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.”²⁵ 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.²⁶ 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.

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

²⁵ Stegall, *The Gospel*, 30.

²⁶ 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).

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.

JOHN PIPER'S DIMINISHED DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION AND ASSURANCE

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I. INTRODUCTION

John Piper has a desire to please God and a passion for world missions. His twin passions come across in his writing and speaking and gain him a large following. None of the discussion which follows is intended to impugn Piper's heart for God, or his pursuit of truth. Indeed, this paper is a direct result of the latter.

In his Crossway Lecture at the 2008 ETS Conference in Providence, Rhode Island, Piper began by recalling a conversation he had with Wayne Grudem several years ago. He said Grudem told him he should come to ETS more often because he was surrounded at his church by people who largely agreed with him, and might not challenge him in the way he would be challenged at ETS. People at ETS were more critical, and Piper would be helped to avoid error and refine his thinking.

To his credit, Piper took that advice. In fact, he started his 2008 ETS address with these words: "So here I am [again], and I am looking for criticism—or at least penetrating questions that will help me avoid error and sharpen my Biblical thinking."¹ Sharing Piper's desire to avoid error, I present these thoughts.

¹John Piper, "Why God Is Not a Megalomaniac in Demanding to Be Worshipped," ETS lecture, November 20, 2008, Providence, Rhode Island.

A year earlier, in November, 2007, Piper delivered the Crossway Lecture at the ETS Conference in San Diego, entitled “Justification and the Diminishing Work of Christ.”² His thesis was that some contemporary teaching on the doctrine of justification “diminishes” the grandeur and wonder of the finished work of Christ. In particular, he pointed to the idea that the imputation of Christ’s righteousness is merely positionally true. In his view those who do not hold to his view that the imputation of Christ’s righteousness is both positional and experiential (in the sense that God guarantees that He will transform the behavior of a justified person into that of experiential righteousness) “diminish the work of Christ” on the cross, inhibit the normal pattern of spiritual growth in the Christian life, and open themselves up to bondage to sin.

At the outset, it is perhaps self-serving, but nevertheless appropriate, to state as clearly as I can my enthusiastic and total agreement with Piper in his passion for God’s holiness, his emphasis on missions, and his pursuit of personal holiness. I say this with conviction and seek to demonstrate it with my life, yet I differ with Piper’s view on the doctrine of justification. This is important, as an underlying theme throughout Piper’s presentation is that those who do not interpret the doctrine of justification as he does do not share this passion for missions, do not go on to godliness, and do not pursue holiness. For example, the fact that 20 families from his church had committed to foreign missions was used as anecdotal evidence that his theology produces such results. But similar results could be shown from groups with very different theology.

Text available online in the *Resource Library* at <http://www.desiringgod.org/>.

²Quotations inserted throughout this paper are taken from John Piper’s 2007 Crossway Lecture at the 59th Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, November 14-16, 2007, in San Diego, CA. Written copy online at http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/ConferenceMessages/ByDate/2007/2489_Justification_and_the_Diminishing_Work_of_Christ/, or CD copy available from ACTS Conference Products, 11139 South Towne Square Ste. F, St. Louis, MO 63123, online at www.actsconferenceproducts.com.

The implication in too much of our invective today is, “Follow my theology and you’ll experience spiritual victory, have a passion for the lost, and your church will grow! Disagree with me, and you’ll struggle with sin, you won’t have passion for the lost, and even if your church grows, you’re just tickling people’s ears with what they want to hear, instead of giving them the tough teaching of Scripture.” This straw man is both arbitrary and demonstrably false.

Similarly, people from all sides of the argument over aspects of the doctrine of justification have a high view of the work of Christ. One who does not share Piper’s viewpoint on the “imputation of Christ’s righteousness” does not automatically have a diminished view of the work of Christ. Neither does it follow that a person who shares Piper’s theology will always magnify the work of Christ by having a passion for souls and a commitment to missions.

Indeed, we may all “diminish” the splendor of the work of Christ, regardless of our theology, in many ways. Struggles with sin are not unique to those holding any particular view of justification. Piper’s own admission of his ongoing struggle with sin is evidence of this fact.³ People with differing interpretations of Biblical teaching on the doctrine of justification are inclined at times to exhibit a lack a passion for the lost, a failure to witness consistently for Jesus Christ, or struggle with bondage to sin. In short, we might say that sin is an “equal opportunity disease” that afflicts all mankind, and affects all Christians, regardless of their doctrine of justification. So

³In response to a question about our imperfectness in this life, Piper responded: “I know people, and I would say this about myself, for whom the greatest threat to my perseverance and my ultimate salvation is the slowness of my sanctification. It’s not theoretical questions like ‘Did He rise from the dead?’ or the problem of evil. I’ve got answers. But why I sin against my wife the same at age 62 that I did at age 42 causes me sometimes to doubt my salvation or the power of the Holy Spirit...This question is not theoretical.” John Piper, “Why God is Not a Megalomaniac in Demanding to be Worshipped” 60th Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society. Recording available through ACTS Conference Products, # EV08487 (www.actsconferenceproducts.com/merchant/ev0108b.pdf).

at the outset, let us dispense with any notion that this or that theology is either the gateway to spiritual success, or the trap-door to spiritual failure.

Two basic issues do, however, come to the surface as a result of Piper's presentation. The first may be characterized as the answer to the Philippian jailor's question, "What must I do to be saved?" It is ironic that what Paul and Silas succinctly stated in response, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved"—an invitation to believe which evidently required no further explanation, and which the jailor received immediately with joy—is the object of intense division, and increasingly complex theological penumbræ in the writings of modern scholarship.⁴ It is always worth asking whether or not a person's soteriology agrees with or undermines Paul's evangelistic statement.

The second issue is an outgrowth of the first, perhaps more of a 'felt issue,' what Piper referred to in his lecture as "the subjective side of the problem, the more pastoral side—namely, the struggle for assurance." Assurance of salvation is often devalued in theological debate, but it is a crucial and deeply felt issue within the wider Christian community.⁵ I suspect that the readiness, and even eagerness, of some theologians to make statements that undermine the doctrine of assurance reflects a too cavalier attitude toward what is intrinsic to evangelical faith. *I agree with Piper that this is important.* How we frame our soteriology impacts the possibility of any real assurance that we are saved, and indirectly affects every aspect of our ongoing Christian walk.

⁴For a breakdown of various approaches to what is required for justification in contemporary scholarship, see Dane C. Ortlund, "Justified by Faith, Judged according to Works: Another Look at a Pauline Paradox," *JETS* 52 (June 2009): 323-39.

⁵Joel R. Beeke, *The Quest for Full Assurance* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1999), 279-85.

II. PIPER'S DIMINISHED DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION

The question “What must I do to be saved?” has eternal ramifications. The gift of God is eternal life—that is what is at stake. Because Scripture is so succinct on this issue, it is hard for anyone laying claim to being an “Evangelical” to deny that Paul’s answer is entirely adequate: “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.” But it is truly spectacular to see what creative theological minds can construe within this simple statement. For example, there are those who insist that saving faith includes works! Despite explicit Biblical statements that justification is not of works (Eph 2:9), that it is received by those who “do not work, but believe” (Rom 4:5), and it is “by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law” (Gal 2:16), they insist on making works part of the equation.

For example, John MacArthur’s writings within the “Lordship Salvation” debate often reflect an inclusion of works in the salvation formula. He writes, “Meritorious works have nothing to do with faith. But *faith works* have everything to do with it.”⁶ This semantic slight-of-hand impregnates “faith” with anything and everything from an attitude of sorrow, to abject grief over sin, to a life of godliness, to—and this is the logical end—an absolute holiness. The inevitable result of this thinking is justification based on our works.

More recently, Paul Rainbow and Richard Gaffin show similar theological dexterity in proposing that there is an “initial justification” which is by faith alone, and a “final justification” which depends on “works of grace.”⁷ Rainbow clearly states that in his view, “good works will be the ground on which God will approve of believers on

⁶ John MacArthur, *Faith Works* (Dallas: Word, 1993), 53, emphasis his.

⁷ Paul A. Rainbow, *The Way of Salvation: The Role of Christian Obedience in Justification* (Bletchley, UK: Paternoster, 2005); Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., “By Faith, Not by Sight:” *Paul and the Order of Salvation* (Bletchley, UK: Paternoster, 2006).

the last day.”⁸ Eternal life is gained, according to this view, by faith *and* good works. Karlberg’s assessment of Rainbow and Gaffin is succinct:

Whether one is reading *The Way of Salvation* or “*By Faith, Not by Sight*,” the message is the same—one that is out of step with Scripture and orthodox Protestant teaching.⁹

It is difficult to see how John Piper’s comments do not lead to the same conclusion. He states that what an unbeliever needs is “the righteousness of someone else”—that is, Christ. But instead of understanding this forensically (judicially), that is, a guilty sinner being “declared righteous” on the basis of Christ’s substitutionary atonement, he sees this as a reference to practical living. Piper is clear: Righteousness “means the way one behaves when one behaves in accord with some right standard.”¹⁰ In fact, he equates Christ’s perfect (practical) obedience in Phil 2:8 with the righteousness the believer receives in Phil 3:9.¹¹ He states:

Christ was found in human form *obedient*; we are found in him *righteous*. Which would naturally mean that in Christ—in union with him—his perfect obedience is counted as ours as gift (sic) from God.¹²

Note: It is not the forensic *result* of Christ’s perfect obedience—a believing sinner being declared righteous

⁸ Rainbow, *The Way of Salvation*, 82-84.

⁹ Mark W. Karlberg, review of *The Way of Salvation*, by Paul Rainbow, and of “*By Faith Not by Sight*,” by Richard Gaffin, *JETS* 50 (June 2007): 428.

¹⁰ See “Justification and the Diminishing Work of Christ,” at desiringgod.org.

¹¹ Piper bases this on the shared use of the passive voice of the word “find” in both verses, but the suggestion that this means our behavior as Christians will (or must) mirror the perfect behavior of Christ is at best an example of finding more in the text than the author ever put there himself, and at worst forcing his own theology on the text. The repetition of a word in two contexts does not allow us to equate the two contexts!

¹² See “Justification and the Diminishing Work of Christ,” at desiringgod.org.

by God on the basis of the Son's finished work, which we receive in justification—rather, “His (Christ's) perfect obedience is counted as ours as [a] gift from God.”

If we have been so made righteous, if Christ's “perfect obedience” is received as a gift at the moment of faith, then the demonstration of that obedience in our behavior immediately becomes a *sine qua non* of justification. Without that “perfect obedience,” how can anyone lay claim to being justified? An *inevitable* outcome of justification, therefore, becomes a *de facto* requirement of it. This view was articulated and defended by John Gerstner, who wrote:

The question is not whether good works are necessary to salvation, but in what way they are necessary. *As the inevitable outworking of saving faith, they are necessary for salvation.*¹³

No matter how we couch it in terms of what God is doing through us, the result is simply this: If we do the works, we are saved. If we fail to do the works, we are not saved. To affirm justification *sola gratia, sola fide, solus Christus* (by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone) has no real meaning if in the next moment we declare that “perfect obedience” will demonstrate whether or not you are saved. Whatever degree of holiness (and no standard can be any higher than Christ's “perfect obedience”) is viewed as an inevitable result of justification, that holy behavior becomes a requirement for justification.

That Piper's doctrine of justification includes a requirement of doing good works is borne out in his preaching and

¹³ John H. Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth: A Critique of Dispensationalism* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1991), 210 (emphasis mine). This is not a new view. Arthur Pink, in *An Exposition of Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968, p600), quotes John Owens—the prince of Puritan expositors—with approval: “...but yet our own diligent endeavor is such an *indispensable means* for that end, as that without it, it will not be brought about...If we are in Christ, God hath given us the lives of our souls, and hath taken upon Himself, in His covenant, the preservation of them. But *yet* we may say, with reference unto the *means* that He hath appointed, when storms and trials arise, *unless we use our diligent endeavors, we cannot be saved*” (italics mine).

writing. Under the heading, “Eternal Life is at Stake,” he says:

He [Paul] foresees the possibility that some professing believers—in the judgment of charity he calls [them] brothers—could be destroyed...

...

Works confirm that we are saved.¹⁴

In a message teaching that we must help fellow brothers and sisters to make it to heaven, Piper says:

In other words, I’m suggesting that the way Paul is motivating us with the death of Christ is not by drawing attention to the fact that the death of Christ secures the brother so we are not needed to get him to heaven and couldn’t destroy him if we wanted to. That’s not the function of the death of Christ in this argument. I’m suggesting that Paul wants us to think this way: Getting to heaven demands the use of means, and Christ has died to make these means effective for your brothers and sisters. The means include persevering in faith (“The one who endures to the end will be saved,” Mark 13:13), and fighting sin (“If by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live,” Rom 8:13), and being exhorted by brothers not to lapse into patterns of sin and unbelief (“exhort one another every day...that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin,” Heb 3:13).¹⁵

¹⁴ John Piper, “We Will All Stand before the Judgment of God (Romans 14:10-13)”; October 30, 2005. Available at desiringGod.org.

¹⁵ John Piper, “Do Not Destroy the Work of God (Romans 14:14-23),” November 6, 2005. Available at desiringGod.org. At times, Piper makes conflicting statements, resulting in confusion as to where he really stands. For example, in “The Justification Debate: A Primer” (*CT*, July 23, 2009; see <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2009/june/29.34.html>), under the heading “The Gospel”, he writes: “The heart of the gospel is the good news that Christ died for our sins and was raised from the dead. What makes this good news is that Christ’s death accomplished a perfect righteousness before God and suffered a perfect condemnation from God, *both of which are counted as ours through faith alone, so that we have eternal life with God in the new heavens and the new earth*” (italics added). Two paragraphs later,

In his famous book, *Desiring God*, he writes:

...These are just some of the conditions that the New Testament says we must meet in order to be saved in the fullest and final sense. We must believe in Jesus and receive him and turn from our sin and obey him and humble ourselves like little children and love him more than we love our family, our possessions, or our life. This is what it means to be converted to Christ. This alone is the way of life everlasting.¹⁶

From an Evangelical perspective, considering the historical debate between Evangelicals and Rome over the role of good works as a means of justification, we might say that ‘the fox is in the henhouse.’ We have acceded to the notion that justification is *not* by faith alone, but by faith *and* works. Our theology must return to a place where we can be both intellectually honest and as concise as Paul was when he invited the Philippian jailor to “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.”

Any inclusion of works into the salvation formula is inimical to the Biblical gospel, and could therefore be said to “diminish the work of Christ,” or to use Paul’s words, to “*nullify* the grace of God” (Gal 2:21).

under the heading “Future Justification,” he writes: “Present justification is based on the substitutionary work of Christ alone, enjoyed in union with him through faith alone. Future justification is the open confirmation and declaration that in Christ Jesus we are perfectly blameless before God. This final judgment accords with our works. That is, the fruit of the Holy Spirit in our lives will be brought forward as the evidence and confirmation of true faith and union with Christ. *Without that validating transformation, there will be no future salvation*” (italics added). How it can be true that “through faith alone...we have eternal life with God in the new heavens and the new earth,” but at the same time also be true that at the “final judgment,” without the “validating transformation” of our good works, “there will be no future salvation”? Which is it—“through faith alone,” or only with “validating transformation” of our works?

¹⁶ John Piper, *Desiring God* (Sisters, OR; Multnomah Publishers, 2003), 69-70. For an excellent response to Piper’s view of Gal 5:6 making good works part of the justification formula (and clarification on other misused Biblical texts in reference to faith and works), see Fred Chay and John P. Correia, *The Faith That Saves: The Nature of Faith in the New Testament* (Schoettle Publishing Company, 2008), 90-101, available by request at <http://www.graceline.net/>.

III. PIPER'S DIMINISHED DOCTRINE OF ASSURANCE

This discussion leads inexorably to the question of assurance of salvation. Piper identified this issue as a major spiritual problem among his parishioners. He stated in his presentation:

I deal with this as much as anything, probably, in the people that I'm preaching to. Fears, and doubts, doubts not about objective 'Did He rise from the dead'—very few people are wrestling with that—but 'Am I in? Am I saved?' That's very common for people to wrestle with.¹⁷

Piper's solution to this epidemic of a lack of assurance of salvation within his congregation is to point to the imputation of Christ's righteousness—the practical out-working of the righteousness of Christ in our daily lives. He states that

...there are deficiencies—defects—in the sinful human soul that were meant to be remedied by the achievement of the imputation of Christ's righteousness to believers. Christ did not perform this great work for nothing. There was a need for it. When that achievement is denied, that need languishes without remedy, and the assumption is made that it can be remedied by Christ's other achievements, like the forgiveness of all our sins.¹⁸

This is a startling statement. Piper suggests that a believer who bases his assurance on the fact that all his sins have been forgiven will “languish” in a lack of assurance, while a person who understands the imputation of Christ's righteousness to mean that they will exhibit his “perfect righteousness” in their lives will overcome the “deficiency in the human soul” which undermines our assurance. Piper offers no Biblical or logical explanation

¹⁷ See “Justification and the Diminishing Work of Christ,” at desiringgod.org.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

why this would be so. Instead, he simply admonishes us, “Don’t try to be wiser than God.”

Since Piper views this as a major spiritual problem within his church, we may assume that he views lack of assurance of salvation as a bad thing. *JOTGES* readers certainly concur with this concern. But if the aim is that Christians will have assurance, it is difficult to understand how basing it on our progressive works of righteousness will produce such a goal. Indeed, Piper’s own statement would suggest that his theology does *not* lead to a solution for the problem of a lack of assurance of salvation. Among those who listen to his teaching each week, who are in his congregation and most likely to embrace and embody his theology, it is “very common” for them to wrestle with a lack of assurance.

Beyond this, Piper himself evidently also wrestles with a lack of assurance of salvation. In response to a question in the 2008 Crossway Lecture at ETS, he said, “...why I sin against my wife the same at age sixty-two that I did at age forty-two causes me sometimes to doubt my salvation.”¹⁹ Unless this was a case of hyperbole, in which Piper overstated his meaning for effect, we cannot but conclude that he himself is, because of his own moral failings, occasionally uncertain of his eternal salvation! While such comments may seem to exhibit a godly humility which reflects well on one’s spiritual destiny, many will struggle to find comfort in the notion that a pastor and Christian leader of Piper’s status is unsure of his eternal destiny.

The fact is, *dependence on our works for assurance of salvation* ultimately and inevitably undermines any real assurance. Even the best of us falls far short of “Christ’s perfect obedience”! Therefore, we are all left with ever-varying levels of eternal *insecurity*. This kind of teaching has spread throughout evangelicalism, resulting in

¹⁹ See footnote 3.

a pandemic of *lack of assurance*.²⁰ This cannot help but “diminish” the doctrine of assurance, that “by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone” a person is justified, possesses eternal life, and with it assurance of salvation.

IV. A BIBLICAL-HISTORICAL CORRECTIVE TO PIPER’S DIMINISHED DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION AND ASSURANCE

Did Jesus accomplish fully the payment for sin once-for-all on the cross? Was it indeed “finished,” as He said (John 19:30)? Concerning this, Calvin writes:

Now this word, which Christ employs, well deserves our attention; for it shows that *the whole accomplishment of our salvation, and all the parts of it, are contained in his death*. We have already stated that his resurrection is not separated from his death, but *Christ only intends to keep our faith fixed on himself alone, and not to allow it to turn aside in any direction whatever. The meaning, therefore, is, that every thing which contributes to the salvation of men is to be found in Christ, and ought not to be sought anywhere else; or—which amounts to the same thing—that the perfection of salvation is contained in him.*

...

If we give our assent to this word which Christ pronounced, *we ought to be satisfied with his death alone for salvation, and we are not at liberty to apply for assistance in any other quarter; for*

²⁰Gary M. Burge, *The NIV Application Commentary: The Letters of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 155, writes: “I am frankly astonished at the number of times I have explained to classes of Christian college students about the unmerited love God has for us...and how in the course of my explanation students from strong evangelical churches literally will cry... they point to the *insecurity* they have learned at their home churches. ‘If I don’t feel like God’s child, maybe I’m not.’ ‘If I can’t always act like God’s child, perhaps I never was.’ My office has witnessed such statements from the children of our evangelical households every semester for years.”

he who was sent by the Heavenly Father to obtain for us a full acquittal, and to accomplish our redemption, knew well what belonged to his office, and did not fail in what he knew to be demanded of him. *It was chiefly for the purpose of giving peace and tranquility to our consciences that he pronounced this word, It is finished. Let us stop here, therefore, if we do not choose to be deprived of the salvation which he has procured for us.*

...

...Christ, having once accomplished, by a single oblation, all that was necessary to be done, declares, from the cross, that all *is finished*.²¹

Leon Morris agrees:

Jesus died with the cry of the Victor on His lips. This is not the moan of the defeated, nor the sigh of patient resignation. It is the triumphant recognition that *He has now fully accomplished the work that He came to do*.²²

Tenney echoes:

The use of the perfect tense in "It is finished" (*tetelestai*) signifies full completion of Jesus' work and the establishment of a basis for faith. *Nothing further needed to be done*.²³

And Gaebelein writes:

But who can tell what this one word "It is finished" means? It is as glorious as it is inexhaustible and unsearchable. Never before and never after was spoken such a marvelous word, which means so much. No Saint is able to measure the depths

²¹ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, trans. William Pringle, vol. 2, Calvin's Commentaries (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1848; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), 235, 236, 237.

²² Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John (NICNT)* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 815, italics mine.

²³ Merrill C. Tenney, *The Gospel of John, (EBC)*, Frank E. Gaebelein, Gen. Ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 9:184, italics mine.

of this triumphant shout. It means that His great sacrificial work, the sin-bearing, was now finished. *All that needed to be done to satisfy the righteousness of God and to vindicate His holiness was finished*; peace was now made in the blood of His cross; all that God in His eternal counsel had purposed was finished; prophecies and types relating to His matchless atoning work were finished. *Yea, all was finished to reach down to man in his deepest degradation and to save him to the uttermost, so that the lost, the guilty, the hell-deserving sinner becomes, trusting in Him, a child of God and an heir of glory.* All is finished to put on the side of the believer every spiritual blessing which an infinite God is able to bestow.²⁴

To the Galatians the Apostle Paul wrote, “I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness comes through the Law, then Christ died needlessly” (Gal 2:21). Concerning this Luther forcefully writes:

The Antichrist teaches that faith is no good unless it is combined with works; instead of the grace of Christ and his kingdom, he has established *the doctrine of works* and ceremonies.²⁵

Undergirding the doctrine of assurance, the Apostle John wrote, “He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life. These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that *you may know that you have eternal life*” (1 John 5:12-13).

Was this knowledge only provisional, based ultimately not on believing, but on works, so that those “who believe in the name of the Son of God” *cannot really* know they “have eternal life”? Such an assertion turns Scripture on its head! As Marshall affirms,

²⁴Arno Clement Gaebelein, *The Gospel of John*, (NP: Gospel Publishing House, 1919), 371, italics mine.

²⁵Martin Luther, *Galatians*; The Crossway Classic Commentaries, Alister McGrath and J.I. Packer, Series Editors (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1998), 113, italics mine.

John was therefore writing not to persuade unbelievers of the truth of the Christian faith but rather *to strengthen Christian believers who might be tempted to doubt the reality of their Christian experience...Those who believe in the name of Jesus can be sure of their possession of eternal life.*²⁶

V. CONCLUSION

We should all be grateful to John Piper for tackling difficult issues associated with the doctrine of justification, and laying bare the difficulties both he and members of his church have experienced in the area of assurance of salvation. An objective look at Piper's view of the imputation of Christ's righteousness, understanding it as "being made righteous" (practically) instead of "being declared righteous" (forensically), leads to the conclusion that it is his own doctrine which is, to use his word, "diminishing" the work of Christ.

It is at best uncertain how Piper's inclusion of works can do anything but "diminish" historic tenets of the doctrine of justification, and fatally undermine any possibility of true assurance. Evangelism likewise is distorted to the point where it becomes very difficult for an unbeliever hearing a presentation like Piper's to grasp the promise of everlasting salvation to the one who simply believes in Jesus.

In our desire to promote holiness, and exalt the finished work of Christ, may we never inadvertently undermine that very work, and "diminish" its completeness and grandeur.

²⁶I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 243, italics mine.

HEBREWS PROVIDES A MODEL FOR HOW TO ENCOURAGE STUCK BELIEVERS TO GET GROWING

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I. INTRODUCTION

Every church has them: believers who have the confidence of spending eternity with Jesus but who are not making progress in their spiritual life. Their stories vary. Some began to grow just after they were saved, then stalled. Others once had boldness for Christ until negative experiences from sharing the gospel of Jesus caused them to draw back and rarely mention the Lord in the presence of non-Christians.¹

First century Jewish believers to whom Hebrews was written had to deal with similar struggles as they sought to grow in their relationship with Jesus. They had a difficult time as they abandoned their cultural practices in Judaism for their newfound faith. What God had once commanded them to do under Mosaic Law was now left behind. When faced with opposition from unbelieving Jewish leaders, some of these believers pulled back and became concerned about the cost of following Christ. They began to consider compromises that would relieve some of the persecution. They began to wonder if following Jesus

¹See the Parable of the Four Soils (e.g., Luke 8:11-15). Editor's note: There are others reasons why believers get stuck including the distractions mentioned concerning the third soil: cares, riches, and the pleasures of life. In addition, poor teaching in the local church may well result in spiritual stagnation.

was really worth it. Secure in their eternal life, they contemplated “coasting” in their spiritual life. They thought they could “act” like they practiced Judaism on the outside while holding to their faith in Christ on the inside. They were not growing in their understanding of all that Jesus had accomplished for them. In fact, they were spiritually stuck and in danger of drifting (cf. Heb 2:1). But God, using an unknown writer, provided the book of Hebrews to encourage Jewish believers to continue on in their spiritual growth.

The word *stuck* is used from a pastoral perspective. From a human point of view, these believers don't seem to be growing. Spiritually, people are either stagnant or moving either forward or backward. But from the perspective of other believers, believers who are not moving forward look *stuck* when they are not growing.

Today's believers face similar struggles, even if they do not come from a Jewish background. Rosemarie Matlak comments:

As modern day Christians, we are beguiled and pressured to distance ourselves from Christ through false teachers, worldly philosophies, discouraging circumstances, and even persecution. As believers we all experience times of spiritual defeat and resulting feelings of rejection and weariness in our walks with God. *It can be tempting to return to our old way of life where we felt accepted and admired, where old friends included us as part of their circle, and where the pursuit of wealth and comfort rewarded us with immediate gratification.*²

One of the lessons we gain from the book of Hebrews is to see how God approaches spiritually stuck believers to encourage them to move on to maturity. The message of Hebrews is specifically aimed at those individuals who have stalled spiritually and need to get growing. This is a

²David Janssen and Rosemarie Matlak, *Hebrews Study Guide* (Sandy, UT: Grace Community Bible Church, 2010), 2, italics original.

practical area of concern for ourselves as we seek to grow in our own spiritual life and for others as we seek to spur (Heb 10:24) them on to maturity. At various times, we and other believers will get stuck in our spiritual life and need to get back on the path of growth. A valid perspective is to view the content of Hebrews as God's approach to getting believers to see the importance of growing and getting back on track spiritually.

II. A FREE GRACE PERSPECTIVE

Although the outcome of a study of Hebrews is often a game of "theological ping-pong,"³ approaching the book from a Free Grace perspective unlocks many profitable lessons God wants us to learn. The book contains four foundational truths that support a Free Grace perspective:

1. *The entire book, including the warning passages, is written to believers who have eternal life.*⁴ Hebrews is not written to a mixed audience of believers and "professing" believers. The author's comments are addressed to believers. More specifically, it was written to Jewish believers who were trusting in the Messiah, Jesus.

2. *Believers are eternally secure in their justification salvation.*⁵ The warnings of Hebrews teach that straying believers may face severe discipline from God. This discipline may include the possibility of physical death and the loss of rewards in eternity, but not loss of eternal life.

3. *This letter was written to people who had been believers for some time but had not grown as God expects.*⁶ Hence they were spiritually stuck.

³ I borrowed this phrase from the title of Basil Mitchell's book, *How to Play Theological Ping-Pong: And Other Essays on Faith and Reason* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1991).

⁴ See, for example, Heb 3:1; 5:12-14; 6:4-5; 13:1-23.

⁵ Cf. Heb 10:10, 14.

⁶ Cf. Heb 5:11-14.

4. The overall goal of Hebrews is to encourage and challenge believers to go on to spiritual maturity.⁷

Although 1 Corinthians addresses believers who have not yet advanced beyond spiritual infancy (1 Cor 3:1-3), Hebrews is distinct in addressing Jewish believers who have ceased to grow and are at risk of moving back into some form of Judaism. They are not growing spiritually and are in danger of defaulting back to their old lifestyle and religious practices, thereby denying Jesus in their daily living. God wants them to reconnect with their earlier confidence in Christ and is optimistic they will (Heb 6:9).

III. ENCOURAGING AND CHALLENGING STUCK BELIEVERS

To help us as we preach, teach, and interact with believers to challenge them to progress in their relationship with Jesus, the book of Hebrews provides a model that includes multiple facets.⁸ This paper elaborates on three of those facets: bringing a message from God, lifting up Jesus, and warning about the dangers of not growing spiritually.

A. BY BRINGING A MESSAGE FROM GOD

God has spoken through His Son and we are to listen! This is where the book of Hebrews begins, and so should we.

Hebrews starts with a reminder: God has spoken through the prophets of Israel but now “has spoken to us in His Son” (Heb 1:1-2). Toward the end of the book, readers are warned, “do not refuse Him [Jesus] who is

⁷Cf. Heb 6:1.

⁸Other approaches used in Hebrews to encourage believers of the importance of growing spiritually include: focusing on future rest and rewards (Heb 2:1-4; 6:7, 12; 10:25), inviting believers to be Christ’s companions (Heb 1:9, 14; 3:14), and following examples of men and women of faith (Heb 13:7, 17).

speaking” (Heb 12:24). The emphasis from beginning to end in the book of Hebrews is on Jesus and responding rightly to Him.

The problem was that these Jewish believers had become hard of hearing. When communicating additional information about Melchizedek, the writer of Hebrews wrote, “we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing” (Heb 5:11). These non-growing believers had become less responsive to spiritual truth and, hence, missed out on additional revelation from God.

Stuck believers need to hear and respond to a “word from the Lord.”⁹ A stalled believer, in particular, needs to be confronted with the authority of what God says. They don’t need man’s opinion or theories about life, reality, and ultimate truth. They need to hear the truth of God’s Word. In a world full of opinions, it is God’s opinion that matters most. When believers are not growing, they need to be challenged by God Himself through His Word. The option always exists that a person may decide not to listen. They may decide God is wrong and reject what He says. But a word from God puts stuck believers in a place where they must decide how they will respond.

The writer of Hebrews models bringing a “word from God” by quoting the OT. In fact, no other NT book quotes the OT more than Hebrews.¹⁰ This not only makes sense in light of the Jewish believers to whom he is writing, but it also emphasizes the importance of God’s Word.

It is interesting how the writer introduces some of the OT citations. For example, “Therefore, just as the Holy Spirit *says*,” (Heb 3:7, emphasis added) was written to introduce an OT quote (Ps 95:7-11). Although the writer

⁹ I use this and similar phrases for two reasons. First, because of the frequency of the various forms of the word “say” (*legō*) with God as the subject and the mention of God’s “voice” (Heb 3:7, 15; 4:7; 12:26) to emphasize the source of the message, God. Second, using “word” points to propositional content in contrast to a subjective impression.

¹⁰ Fourteen percent (14%) of the English words in the book of Hebrews are quoted from the OT.

was quoting a 1,000-year-old passage, the passage was presented as something the Holy Spirit is *presently* saying!¹¹ The writer of Hebrews brought a current “word from the Lord” by quoting a passage of Scripture. Felix H. Cortez from the Universidad de Montemorelos makes the same observation:

Thus, implicitly or explicitly, the author of Hebrews describes God as speaking directly to the audience of the letter in the words of the Scriptures. Note that the ‘word of God’ is spoken, not written. It is a striking fact that the author of Hebrews does not use the common formula ‘as it is written.’¹²

When we accurately quote and apply a passage of God’s Word, it is something God is presently saying to the hearers. A “word from the Lord” must come from the Bible. It is not some subjective sense of what we think God said to us apart from Scripture. Therefore, we can conclude that a “word from the Lord” comes from a correct interpretation of a Biblical passage that is accurately applied; otherwise, it is not a “word from the Lord.”¹³ The objective Word of God, the Bible, is the “word from God.”

¹¹ This precise phrase (“the Holy Spirit says”) is found only one other place in the NT. A prophet named Agabus uses this phrase as he brings a revelation from God for Paul about what will happen to Paul when he travels to Jerusalem (Acts 21:10-11). In a similar statement, the Holy Spirit testifies “saying” and “says” quoting Jer 31:33-34 in Heb 10:15-17. In Acts 28:25, Paul says “the Holy Spirit spoke rightly” and then quotes from Isaiah 6.

¹² Felix H. Cortez, “See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking’: Hearing God Preach and Obedience in the Letter to the Hebrews,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 19 (2008): 102.

¹³ What the Bible text says is the “word from God.” Bob Wilkin rightly states, “Some people strangely think that ‘devotional’ reading of the Bible is aimed at hearing what God says to us and study of the Bible is aimed at learning facts from the Bible so we can teach others those facts. Not true. All Bible reading is Bible study. And all Bible study has as its aim becoming more like our Savior . . . The Word of God is powerful and living. It is our spiritual food. Growth comes by the Word changing our thinking, which in turn changes our actions.” From “Reading the Bible: The Key to Interpretation” in *Grace in Focus* (September-October 2009).

There is a subjective aspect to the process in responding to God's Word when the Holy Spirit convicts and points out truths in the Word related to our life. The Spirit of God uses the Word of God. A picture that helps me is of the Holy Spirit standing next to me with a yellow highlighter, periodically marking something in God's Word for me to notice and respond to. Hence, the reason I sometimes say, "Wow, I never noticed that before!" Once again, we can choose to ignore or reject God speaking to us through His Word and remain unchanged.

When I was at Dallas Theological Seminary, Professor Bill Lawrence gave us an assignment in a preaching class. He asked us to write about how to preach with power. I had no idea what he was getting at. At the time, my only recollection of "power" terminology came from charismatic churches. I remember asking him to help me (professors are so patient!). The answer: Preachers preach and teachers teach with power to the degree that they 1) accurately communicate the Bible with 2) a heart of dependence on the Holy Spirit. The degree with which we accurately preach and teach the Word of God is the degree to which the Holy Spirit can bring a "word from the Lord" to the hearers.

A local church should accurately present God's Word to people. That is something the unbelieving world cannot do. If it does, then that local church is a beacon of truth in a dead and dying world. Hebrews 4:12 is well known for its affirmation of the power of God's Word, and this is precisely what is needed for spiritually stuck believers who face critical decisions.

In our quest to be creative, interesting, relevant, and entertaining, we can get off track and decrease our emphasis on God's Word. Sometimes people walk away having enjoyed the message but with no sense they have heard from God. Therefore, I seriously consider whether my preaching and teaching bring messages from God. Stuck believers, in particular, need a "word from the Lord" to

help them. It is the Word of God that the Holy Spirit uses to change lives.

Spiritual growth is an issue of the heart. When people are presented with a message from God, it is the response of their hearts that matters. Three times (Heb 3:7, 15; 4:7) the author of Hebrews quotes Ps 95:7-8 with the phrase “Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts.” Notice the close connection between hearing and heart in Ps 95:7-8. Non-growing believers have a heart problem: They have hardened their hearts.

There is also a connection between hearing and obeying. Two of the three times the word “obey” occurs in Hebrews,¹⁴ it is the word for “hear” (*akouō*) with the preposition “by, through, under” (*hupō*) added to the front of the word, which results in the word “obey” (*hupakouō*). The right response to hearing is obeying. This is how it works with our children. When I ask or tell my boys to do something and they don’t respond with obedience, I ask, “Did you hear me?” To hear a “word from the Lord,” we need soft hearts that are willing to respond with faith and obedience. When we clearly present the Word of God to a non-growing believer, they have to respond. They can choose to harden their hearts and refuse what God says to them or respond in obedience, but they must decide how to respond.

The concept of speaking a message from God is mentioned in Heb 13:7, where God reminds these believers to “remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you.” These leaders are to be remembered because they “spoke the word of God to you.” Peter echoes this same truth when he says, “Whoever speaks, *is to do so* as one who is speaking the utterances of God” (1 Pet 4:11a). It is the Bible that God uses to address the hearts of people. As

¹⁴The Greek word for “hear” (*akouō*) is used eight times in Hebrews including Heb 3:7, 15; 4:7, which quote Ps 95:7-8 mentioned above. The English word for “obey” is found three times in Hebrews (5:9; 11:8; 13:17) in the NASB. Heb 5:9 and 11:8 use the Greek word *hupakouō* and Hebrews 13:17 uses the Greek word *peithō*, which has the meaning “to persuade, to have confidence.”

Heb 4:12 so powerfully says, “For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” Stuck believers must respond to God Himself when He has spoken directly to them.

B. BY LIFTING UP JESUS

Many things can be the focus of our preaching, teaching, and study of God’s Word. This includes God’s instruction on living wisely, promises to claim, sins to repent, principles to guide our decisions, and truth to understand life from a Biblical perspective. Yet in the book of Hebrews, the focus is clearly on Jesus Christ. Although that could be said about all the NT books, Hebrews makes direct comparisons between many aspects of Jesus and His ministry and the Old Covenant. Jesus is repeatedly shown to be the fulfillment of the OT practices mentioned in Hebrews. A standard outline of Hebrews rightfully emphasizes “The Superiority of the Person of Christ (Hebrews 1-4), The Superiority of the Priesthood of Christ (Hebrews 5-10), The Superiority of the Power of Christ (Hebrews 11-13)”¹⁵

Church congregations in the United States typically do not include a group of Jewish believers who are being pressured and tempted to return to the practices of Judaism. Individual Jewish believers may face this. Yet some believers are pressured to return to their original religious upbringing. Here in Utah, it is a very real issue for people who become believers by faith alone in Christ alone out of Mormonism. Friends and relatives frequently put pressure on new believers to return to the practices of and participation in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (LDS).

In other parts of the country, one religious group or another is predominant, and believers in Jesus who step

¹⁵ Charles C. Ryrie, *Ryrie Study Bible*, NAS, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995) 1944.

away from that particular church or group face very real religious, social, and sometimes even financial consequences. In all cultures, believers face various levels of pressure to return to their religious roots that are not centered on Jesus and the Bible.

Even for believers without a religious background, the thought of backing off from fully following Jesus and returning to friends, activities, practices, and lifestyles from their “before they found Jesus days” can be difficult to resist. Even if their situation before they believed was challenging, a certain level of comfort and familiarity can again make not living for Jesus attractive.

Hebrews is not addressing Gentile believers, but we can understand why Jewish believers hesitated to “press on to maturity” in the face of persecution (Heb 10:23-38). By simply keeping private their belief in Jesus and returning to the regular practices of Judaism, they likely would have reduced the opposition they were facing. This is analogous to politically correct America, where religious beliefs are viewed as acceptable as long as they are kept private. In many places around the world, public display of your faith in Christ can get you killed. The recipients of Hebrews had not yet faced death for their faith (Heb 12:4). In spite of the earthly danger these believers faced, God still challenged them to live for Jesus.¹⁶

As we direct stuck believers back to a path of growth, we must emphasize the superiority of Jesus over all the alternatives offered by this temporal world. Just as Hebrews illustrates how Jesus is superior to the Old Covenant, we too must illustrate how Jesus is superior to whatever else seeks to become the central focus of a person’s life. The common false gods or idols of materialism, pleasure, and power are well known. As God says in 1 John 2:16, “For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust

¹⁶These Jewish believers are instructed to “hold fast” to their confidence (Heb 3:6), their assurance (Heb 3:14), and their confession (Heb. 4:14 and 10:23).

of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world.”

A number of passages specifically mention focusing on Jesus. Hebrews 3:1 says, “Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of a heavenly calling, *consider Jesus*, the Apostle and High Priest of our confession” [italic added]. The well-known passage of Heb 12:2 says, “*fixing our eyes on Jesus*, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” [italic added].

The reminder to focus on Jesus and lift Him up should cause us to evaluate our teaching and preaching of God’s Word. Sometimes what believers need is not more religious activity, but a clearer understanding of who Jesus is and what He is like. For example, one of the adult Sunday School teachers at our church in Sandy, UT, Grace Community Bible Church, was concerned about an acquaintance we both knew who was not growing spiritually. The teacher suggested this person needed a clearer and more Biblically accurate view of Jesus. I agreed.

We can also get off track in our preaching. Mark Galli notes, “The sermon has inadvertently become a showcase of the pastor’s life and faith; less about the centrality and greatness of Jesus.”¹⁷ God can move believers spiritually as we direct their attention to Jesus.

C. BY WARNING BELIEVERS ABOUT THE DANGERS OF NOT GROWING

God is warning believers in Hebrews to watch out for certain dangers that will hinder and damage spiritual growth. As loving parents, we do the same thing with our children. We want them to avoid the pain that comes from making poor choices. I often find myself saying, “Watch out for this!” and “This is what you need to do to help your life.” Each warning comes out of love and concern

¹⁷Mark Galli, “Enough of Me Already!” *Leadership* (Winter 2010): 89.

for my children, even if they don't view it that way! God expresses His love for His children through warnings and exhortations that help us grow.

*1. By using the warnings in Hebrews
as a way to evaluate problems*

In the book of Hebrews, God mentions a number of dangers that believers must watch out for. Most NT commentators see five warnings in Hebrews (Heb 2:1-4; 3:7-4:13; 5:11-6:12; 10:19-39; 12:14-29).¹⁸ Much has been written about these warnings from a variety of perspectives. Dr. Tom Constable, Senior Professor of Bible Exposition at Dallas Theological Seminary, succinctly summarizes each of the five warnings with the following words:

1. Negligence (2:1-4)
2. Unbelief (3:7-19)
3. Immaturity (5:11-6:12)
4. Willful sinning (10:19-39)
5. Unresponsiveness (12:14-29)¹⁹

The distinction of a Free Grace perspective is the recognition that the entire book of Hebrews, including the warning passages, is addressed to believers who are secure in their eternal life. God's desire is for them to grow spiritually (i.e., "press on to maturity" [Heb 6:1]). These warnings are meant to discourage these Jewish believers from returning to the practices of Judaism and to encourage them to grow into spiritual maturity.

The warnings in Hebrews can be itemized in various ways that result in more than just five warnings. A more complete list is the nine warnings by Randall Gleason:

1. Spiritual drift (2:1)
2. Neglect (2:3)

¹⁸ Herbert W. Bateman, ed., *Four Views on the Warning Passages in Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2007), 90.

¹⁹ Mark Bailey and Tom Constable, *The New Testament Explorer* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1999), 506-507.

3. Unbelief (3:12)
4. Disobedience (4:11)
5. Immaturity (5:11-6:1)
6. Spiritual lethargy (6:12)
7. Willful sin (10:26)
8. Immorality (12:16)
9. Disregard of divine warnings (12:25)²⁰

To warn someone (*chrēmatisō* in Heb 12:25) is to make them aware of harm or danger.²¹ Gleason's nine descriptions are dangers to watch out for in advance. In Hebrews, these believers are already experiencing a number of these pitfalls (e.g. neglect, immaturity), if not many of them; hence the need for this letter.

Gleason's list gives actions and attitudes that cause believers to get off track and stagnate in their spiritual growth. Believers, by habitual behavior, often get stuck in the very places they are warned to avoid! For example, golfers are warned about not hitting their ball into a sand trap, but because of carelessness or a lack of skill, they often end up there anyway.

When examining my own spiritual life, I find it helpful to ask which of these mistakes I am most likely to make. How do I get unstuck when I fall into one of these traps? The warnings in Hebrews can serve as a spiritual checklist for believers to evaluate spiritual health. As a pastor, I can use this list to determine possible places where someone has gone off track and become stuck. This, in turn, helps me figure out what course of action will be helpful for that person.

2. By using the commands in Hebrews as a way to develop solutions

The specific commands in Hebrews provide us with useful information about helping stuck believers to get

²⁰ Herbert W. Bateman, ed., *Four Views on the Warning Passages in Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2007) 250.

²¹ See Colin Brown, *NIDNTT*, 3: 324-25.

growing again. Hebrews is described as a “word of exhortation” (Heb 13:22). As it turns out, many exhortations are given by the writer of Hebrews to the readers. Once again, the lists can vary in number depending on how they are counted.²² God’s love for us is evident in the commands He gives from His eternal perspective, which often challenges our limited, temporal view of life.

With these exhortations, fellow believers can avoid needless heartache and enjoy the good things God has for them in this life and beyond! My list of specific commands in the book of Hebrews:²³

1. Focus on the supreme character and position of Jesus (2:1).
2. Study and understand the faithful life Jesus lived (3:1-2).
3. Do not harden your heart to God’s word (3:7-8); “today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts”; this shows up three times (3:7-8, 15; 4:7), so it must be important!
4. Guard your heart from unbelief (3:12).
5. Encourage one another to not be deceived by sin (3:13).
6. Don’t miss out on God’s rest (4:1).
7. Be diligent in your spiritual life and witness so you will enjoy the promised future rest (4:11).
8. Publicly speak of your belief in Jesus (4:14).
9. Humbly go to Jesus for strength in times of difficulty (4:16).
10. Decide to apply yourself to growing spiritually (6:1).

²² J. Dwight Pentecost lists 38 exhortations in *A Faith that Endures* (Grand Rapids: Discovery House Publishers, 1992), 24-25.

²³ This list consists of 21 of the 29 Greek imperatives (eight don’t directly apply) and 13 first-person, subjective-mood verbs translated “let us.” Wallace comments: “Since there is no first person imperative, the hortatory subjunctive is used to do roughly the same task. Thus this use of the subjunctive is an exhortation in the *first person plural*.” Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 464. Eight statements of advice from the author of Hebrews are included in this list as well.

11. Be diligent, not lazy, about spiritual growth (6:11-12a).
12. Imitate growing believers (6:12b).
13. Approach Jesus with sincere confidence (10:22).
14. Publicly speak of future hope (10:23).
15. Actively prod other believers to join you in doing good for others (10:24).
16. Be actively involved in church (10:25).
17. Recall your early days as a new believer when you were living for the Lord (10:32).
18. Be bold in your faith, which God greatly rewards (10:35).
19. Don't deny faith in Jesus by words or actions because it will lead to judgment (10:39).
20. Trust God, This is the only way to please Him (11:6b).
21. Seek God, for He rewards those who seek Him (11:6c).
22. Get rid of hindrances to your spiritual life, specifically unbelief (12:1a).
23. Approach your spiritual life as a long-distance run, focused on Jesus (12:1-2).
24. Think carefully about how Jesus endured persecution to strengthen your perseverance (12:3).
25. Be strong when the Lord disciplines you as a son (12:5).
26. Strengthen yourself and other believers who are struggling (12:12).
27. Remove obstacles to prevent spiritual harm (12:13).
28. Pursue peace and holiness in relationships (12:14).
29. Pay attention to what Jesus says (12:25).
30. Show gratitude to the Lord by serving Him (12:28).
31. Continue to love other believers (13:1).
32. Actively show hospitality (13:2).
33. Remember believers who are in prison for their faith (13:3).
34. Honor marriage with purity (13:4).
35. Be content with what you have (13:5).

36. Remember and honor leaders who teach the Word of God (13:7).

37. Hold to grace, not to strange teachings contrary to grace (13:9).

38. Endure the disapproval of people as you follow Jesus (13:13).

39. Praise God even in the midst of opposition (13:15).

40. Sacrificially do good for others (13:16).

41. Trust and follow your spiritual leaders (13:17).

42. Respond rightly to the message of Hebrews (13:22).

These exhortations provide helpful instructions for individual believers to resume growing. These commands are like tools in a toolbox, available to use in my own life and in the lives of others to help us grow. In other words, they are resources that I draw on to encourage spiritual growth.

3. Three examples of how sharing the warnings and exhortations of Hebrews can be helpful

Example 1: Recently, I met with a man who is a believer, but his church involvement had been minimal and sporadic. He readily admitted that he had been drifting spiritually (warning No. 1) and had neglected (warning No. 2) his spiritual life. I challenged him to consider the possibility that he was wasting his life by spending it on leisure and entertainment and making no impact for eternity. In this case, he was not defensive, but rather, he was open to suggestions. We discussed ways he could be more diligent (No. 7) in his spiritual life and the need for him to apply himself (No. 10) and grow spiritually. As we explored ways he could serve the Lord (No. 30), we agreed that he and his wife would be a good fit for hospitality (No. 32) in our connecting ministry. This is an excellent example of how the exhortations given in Hebrews can take a variety of forms.

Example 2: This example involves an immature woman believer who was struggling with life and her faith. She

was dealing with disappointment and bitterness (Heb 12:15). As a result, she pulled away from church and away from some of her Christian friends. I encouraged her that we are here to help (No. 26) and that this is a time when she needs Jesus' help (No. 9) and the support of others (No. 16). However, I did not get a chance to tell her that this is a time when she needs to publicly speak of her belief in Jesus (No. 8). This is a woman who very much needs the rest of us to provide encouragement and support (No. 26 and others). It remains to be seen how her situation will play out.

Example 3: This example comes from our New2Grace class, which provides orientation for people who are new to our church. When people first attend a worship service at Grace Community Bible Church, they are encouraged to enroll in the senior pastor's New2Grace class. In the first session of this two-part class, Pastor Dan Hornok goes over the history and beliefs of our church. In the second session, he talks about how Grace can support a person to grow spiritually. New2Grace is an opportunity to spell out the expectations we as a church have for people who attend Grace. We expect them to: attend the worship service, participate in one of the three adult Sunday School classes, and get involved in a ministry. Laying these expectations out has been extremely helpful in encouraging people to participate in the community of Grace Community Bible Church. And those newcomers who are spiritually stalled are helped by being directly invited and challenged to be fully involved in a Bible believing church (No. 16).

IV. CONCLUSION

We can view the content of Hebrews as God's approach to getting believers to see the importance of growing spiritually. In the book of Hebrews, we see how God approaches spiritually "stuck" believers to encourage them

on to maturity before they make significant poor choices with eternal consequences. The focus in Hebrews is getting believers growing, not to test whether or not they have eternal life.

Hebrews provides many ways we can challenge stalled believers to grow, but three of the more important are: bringing a message from God, lifting up Jesus, and warning believers about the dangers of not growing.

In local church ministry, Biblical instruction must seek to accurately teach the Bible from a Free Grace perspective and bring a “word from God.” We should lift up Jesus and keep our focus on Him in our conversations. As we build relationships with other believers in a local church, we can help each other to heed the warnings and follow the commands of Hebrews. When people get involved in serving Jesus inside or outside the walls of our local church they begin investing their lives in eternity rather than spending their lives on themselves. In Hebrews, believers are invited to live their lives in such a way that when the Lord Jesus returns they will enjoy the future rest and rewards that He has for those who diligently follow Him.

BOOK REVIEWS

Back to Faith: Reclaiming Gospel Clarity in an Age of Incongruence. By Fred R. Lybrand. NP: Xulon Press, 2009. 297 pp. Paper, \$18.99.

Seven of the eight chapters have the words *the cliché* in them. The cliché in question, attributed to John Calvin, is stated in the preface and the start of Chap. 1 as well: “It is therefore faith alone which justifies, and yet the faith which justifies is not alone” (pp. ix, 3). Thus the question being considered in light of Calvin’s famous dictum is this: does faith guarantee works?

The word *cliché* might be seen by some to be a bit negative. Possibly a word like *dictum* would have been a better choice.

The chapter titles, as well as the title and subtitle of the entire book, fail to clarify what each is about and fail to draw the reader in.

The title would have been better if it incorporated the message of the cliché/dictum in some way. Here is one option: *The Faith that Saves Is Indeed Alone: Good Works Are Neither a Proof Nor Condition of Eternal Life*. Another possible title and subtitle would be: *Faith Alone Saves in Spite of What Theologians Are Saying: Calvin’s Famous Dictum Reconsidered*.

One of the most powerful chapters was Chap. 2: “The Cliché is Logically Invalid.” Lybrand shows how this seemingly sound saying is actually logically impossible. Salvation cannot be by faith alone and yet not by faith alone. It is either by faith alone or it is not by faith alone.

In this chapter the author introduces something called a “causal array.” It is a box with two potentially related items (like good parents and good children) and then a series of plusses and minuses. While some of these are fairly easy to figure out, I think it would have been more

reader friendly to simply state the point without the boxes and symbols (and in some cases shading too). Once these boxes arrived, the discussion seemed more esoteric.

The next chapter, Chap. 3, is entitled, “The Cliché is Theologically Invalid.” It is a bit brief, but helpful. The author does a good job of showing how Calvin and others end up contradicting themselves when discussing texts like James 2.

Chapter 4 shows how the dictum is exegetically flawed by examining Jas 2:14-26. The discussion is very good. Evidently Lybrand chose to limit his discussion to this one passage in this chapter so as to keep its length down. Yet in Chap. 6 he continues the discussion by looking at a number of other texts. It might have been wise to shorten the discussion of James 2 slightly and to include the discussion from Chap. 6 here. Or, since these are two long chapters, they could have been placed back to back. It is not clear why a chapter on pragmatic concerns (Chap. 5) intervenes between these two chapters.

Chapter 7, on John Piper’s use of the cliché, is a very powerful one.

For those familiar with the writings of Zane Hodges, Jody Dillow, and other Free Grace writers, most of what is in this book is not new. The author basically is restating what others have written. Still, the material is helpful, especially for those who have not read all of the Free Grace literature.

Though the author has been involved in the so-called crossless gospel controversy, he does not engage that discussion here. Clearly he is writing to a larger audience than simply people attuned to that issue. It is surprising, however, that he does not actually say what the object of saving faith is in a book dealing with saving faith and “reclaiming gospel clarity.” Possibly that is because Lybrand’s focus is not precisely on *the content* of saving faith, but is rather on the issue of the supposed inevitability of good works. Even so, it would have been helpful

if he had discussed, at least briefly, the object of saving faith at some point.

There are no Scripture or subject indexes. They would have been helpful.

In spite of some weaknesses, there is much helpful information in this book. I recommend it.

Robert N. Wilkin

Editor

Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society

Denton, Texas

Simply by Grace: An Introduction to God's Life-Changing Gift. By Charles C. Bing. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2009. 160 pp. Paper, \$18.00.

As the subtitle suggests, this book is directed to people who are new or relatively new to Free Grace issues. The author's style is significantly different from many of the Free Grace books (e.g., by Hodges and Dillow), which have been heavy on exegesis. This book is easy to understand and very reader friendly.

The so-called crossless gospel controversy is not mentioned or directly discussed. While Bing does cite 1 Cor 15:3-4 (which he mistakenly cites as 1 Cor 15:4-5, see p. 147), he does not wade into the discussion of what the minimum content of saving faith is (though see p. 41 where he says one must believe in Jesus and in His death and resurrection in order for Him to give us everlasting life). Instead, he rejects many faulty invitations like "Ask Jesus into your heart," "Give your heart to God," "Invite Christ into your life," "Receive Christ as your Savior," "Make Christ Lord and Savior," "Make Christ Lord of your life," "Put Jesus on the throne of your life," "Confess your sins," "Repent of your sins," and "Pray this prayer" (pp. 149-53). This is all very helpful and timely.

There is a strong emphasis on the promise of everlasting life in this book. Chapter 6 deals with eternal security and Chap. 7 deals with assurance of eternal security. Bing doesn't repeatedly say that one must believe in Jesus *for everlasting life* in order to be born again, however, he does say this, "The way I understand the Bible, anyone who is a true Christian would at some point have had to believe God's promise of eternal life, because that's what it means to be a Christian, a *believer*" (p. 77, italics his).

The best chapter in my opinion was Chap. 8, "Grace and Good Works." Bing does an excellent job of explaining why assurance is not based on our works, what James 2:14-26 means, and what the options are in terms of a professing believer whose works show someone in the spiritual far country (he may be a born-again backslider, he may be a newer Christian who has not yet matured, or possibly he never understood and believed the gospel message in the first place, pp. 90-92). I also thought that his discussion of the *Bēma* and accountability (Chap. 9: A New Accountability) was excellent.

His discussion of what faith is (pp. 40-41) and of *costly grace* and of so-called *cheap grace* (pp. 45-46) is also superb.

The story about his grandparents who came from China to America in the 1870s is quite moving (pp. 131-32). His paternal grandmother came to faith in Jesus Christ after she and her son (Bing's Dad) were abandoned by the author's grandfather. Bing says, "I also enjoy her spiritual freedom through Jesus Christ" (p. 132).

There is room to quibble a bit. The lack of a Scripture or Subject index renders this book less helpful than it could have been. That Bing fails to cite other Free Grace books or organizations makes it harder for the person new to the Free Grace position to find other similar books. And, finally, for a book on grace, there is actually only a very superficial discussion of the word *grace* (pp. 16-18), though this is understandable since the author intentionally avoided becoming overly academic.

That this book is published by Kregel, a major publisher, is certainly encouraging for *JOTGES* readers. It is heartening to see the Free Grace position receiving attention by a major publisher.

This is a helpful book with which to introduce friends to the Free Grace position. While I would explain a few things a bit differently than the author (e.g., repentance), I found myself in essential agreement throughout. I recommend this book.

Robert N. Wilkin

Editor

Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society

Denton, Texas

The Doctrines That Divide: A Fresh Look at the Historic Doctrines That Separate Christians. By Erwin Lutzer. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1998. 247 pp. Paper, \$15.99.

I saw this book in a catalog, not realizing it was written twelve years ago. Yet I'm glad I ordered it. Lutzer discusses a few issues that are crucial to Free Grace people and the book covers timeless topics so the copyright date is insignificant.

Lutzer discusses a number of topics that will be only be of mild interest to the Free Grace reader including a discussion of whether Jesus is truly God and truly man, whether Mary is the mother of God and Peter the first pope, and four chapters on predestination and free will looking at the subject through the eyes of eight theologians, four on each side.

The two chapters which should be of real interest to *JOTGES* readers are Chap 5, dealing with the justification by faith question, and Chap 13, examining eternal security.

Lutzer adopts a typical Calvinist stand on most of the issues, including the nature of saving faith. He suggests that believing in Jesus is more than “assent to the truths of salvation” (p. 99). Lutzer suggests one must also *trust Christ*, which he explains means “the transferring of all of our confidence to Christ alone.” But then he gives a modified form of the chair illustration that muddies the waters.

A man falls off a cliff and as he is falling to his certain death, he grabs a branch that is miraculously growing out of the wall of the cliff. His grip won’t last long, but another miracle occurs when an angel appears. “Do you believe I can save you?” “Yes,” says the man.

“Do you believe I will save you?” “Yes,” the man replies. “Then let go [of the branch]!”

Lutzer then adds this confusing explanation: “The ‘letting go’ is faith. Christ wants us to rest our full intellectual, emotional, and spiritual weight on him alone. That is saving faith in Christ, who alone is qualified to reconcile us to God” (p. 99).

Note the man already believes the angel both can and will save him. But that isn’t belief, even though in the illustration both are called belief. Now to believe he must add not a new conviction/persuasion, but rather an action, he must release his hands from the branch.

While the illustration is clever, it is not found in Scripture and it is confusing. We do not choose to believe in Jesus, as the illustration surely implies. (Indeed, later Lutzer speaks of making a decision to be born again [p. 225].) And there is no letting go. Once a person believes that Jesus gives eternal life to all who simply believe in Him for it, there is no additional step. What would “letting go” be if believing in Jesus is not enough? How does a person who already believes in Jesus *let go of the branch*?

Lutzer disagrees with the notion held by both Calvinists and Arminians that perseverance in obedience is required to make it into the kingdom (pp. 231-32). *JOTGES* readers will be encouraged by this discussion, though Lutzer

does confuse things a bit when he says “Those who say they have believed but exhibit no fruit of the Spirit and no appetite for prayer and God’s Word have ample reason to doubt whether they were truly saved” (p. 232), though he does go on to add this helpful comment, “but then again they might be true believers. Christians have been known to fall into doctrinal and moral failure. Some have rebelled against God and have been taken away in death (1 Cor 11:30).”

Lutzer also has a funny story about the Arminian pastor who got tired of a drunk coming forward every week to get saved again. He pastor said, “Next week I ought to shoot you right after you get saved, so that you’d be sure of heaven!” (p. 227).

Lutzer has the typical Calvinist understanding of assurance as being based on the promises of Christ plus the inner witness of the Holy Spirit plus the fruit of the new life (pp. 237-38).

As the subtitle and the words of the text suggest, Lutzer gives the impression that both Calvinists and Arminians are born again, despite the fact that both believe, according to Lutzer, “that continual obedience is necessary for salvation” (p. 231). This too is puzzling and is not explained.

While there are some areas *JOTGES* readers will find fault with, there is much here worth reading. Lutzer’s style is clear and personable. I recommend this book.

Robert N. Wilkin

Editor

Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society

Denton, Texas

One-Minute Prayers for Men. By Hope Lyda. Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 2004/2010. 288 pp. Cloth. \$9.99.

Do you have a tendency to struggle with communication, especially when it comes to talking with God in prayer? Do you ever find yourself too busy to pray? Hope Lyda, bestselling author of the popular *One-Minute Prayers* series, has penned a little prayer book for men, keeping these types of considerations in mind.

One-Minute Prayers for Men is neatly organized topically, covering a range of topics especially relevant to men including work, marriage, sexuality, temptation, communication and management, even a section on asking for directions. This book will serve as a prayer catalyst, providing a daily starting place for men and it only takes a minute to read through each day.

Not only does the book provide aid for a stifling prayer life, it more importantly centers upon praying the Word of God. Each daily entry contains a relevant topical Scripture and a simple expository prayer that is both contextual and practical for personal application. An index of the Scriptures utilized throughout would be useful, but was unfortunately omitted.

Regarding the author's soteriology, especially in relation to the theology of justification, an entry on John 3:36 is most telling and refreshingly consistent with the Free Grace position:

"Lord, I believe! I believe in You and I believe in Your Son. And for such a simple faith, You have given me eternal life. That eternal life is not something I will someday inherit, it's mine right now and I rejoice in it" (p. 167).

However, the entry in response to a reading of Eph 2:8-9 is lackluster at best and missing exposition on the importance of faith alone in Christ alone for justification:

"God, everything I have is from You. The faith I hold onto tightly is a gift of Your grace. If people see the peace and wholeness in my life, may I never claim

responsibility for such things. I will share about Your mercy. I will share how Your love transformed me at a time when I could do nothing to help myself. My dependence on You should shine far brighter than my self-sufficiency. Let everything I do, say, accomplish, or receive praise for be a reflection of Your gift” (p. 42).

Clearly, this book is written from the perspective and with the purpose of ministering directly to Christian men, not necessarily for evangelistic purposes. As such, none of the entries attempt to cast doubt on the reader’s salvation, but rather spur the reader on to a productive Christian life lived out daily and grounded upon the cornerstones of the Word of God and prayer.

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Free Grace Soteriology. By David R. Anderson. NP: Xulon Press, 2010. 383 pp. Paper, \$20.99.

Designed as a textbook for college and seminary classes, Anderson’s book meets a significant need. Hopefully textbooks for the nine other major doctrines will soon be produced by Anderson and others.

The book has the following chapter titles: the meaning of soteriology, the sinfulness of man, salvation in the OT, the cross of Jesus Christ, justification, the order of salvation, repentance, faith, eternal security, assurance of salvation, regeneration, Lordship Salvation, infants and heathen, and divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Those chapters are highly practical and cover the major issues from a Free Grace perspective.

In the opening chapter Anderson does a nice job of showing what most textbooks on soteriology fail to show,

that salvation in the Bible is broader than regeneration. Salvation in the Bible is deliverance of many kinds.

The discussion on salvation in the OT, though helpful, stopped short of being clear on what OT people believed in order to be born again (see pp. 65-66).

In the chapter on the cross, in addition to covering substitution Anderson also discusses the extent of the atonement. He concludes “that Christ’s death is *sufficient* to pay for the sins of the whole world of mankind, but *efficient* only for those who believe” (p. 103, italics his). While this is a typical Free Grace understanding, it would have been helpful to have a brief discussion of the possibility that it is both sufficient and efficient for all and that the issue in regeneration is not sin, which Jesus has taken away (John 1:29; 1 John 2:2), but death and life eternal. Some, including this reviewer, within the Free Grace camp hold that view.

Anderson argues that repentance, understood as “the internal resolve to turn from one’s sins” (p. 139), is not a condition of everlasting life. His discussion on repentance is excellent, though some will be disappointed that he fails to discuss the change of mind view, which is held by some in Free Grace circles.

So, too, the author’s discussion of saving faith in the NT is outstanding (pp. 163-83). Anderson defends the idea that there is no type of faith in Christ as Savior that is not saving. He gives an excellent discussion of John 2:23-25, Jas 2:14-26, and other tough texts on saving faith.

The discussions of eternal security and assurance are excellent, though I was surprised that Anderson did not use some obvious texts where the Lord taught eternal security and assurance (e.g., John 3:16; 5:24; 6:35, 37, 39; 11:26).

Regarding those who haven’t heard, Anderson argues persuasively that “if someone responds to the light they have been given by God, they will receive more light” (p. 272).

There is no discussion of the current controversy over the precise content of saving faith. While I think at least a short discussion of this issue would be helpful in a book on Free Grace soteriology, I certainly understand the author's reluctance to include such a discussion. If he wishes this work to be used widely by all Free Grace people, then he doesn't want to risk eliminating many of his potential audience.

Instead of footnotes, this work has endnotes (which are mistakenly called *footnotes* on 353).

It really would have been helpful if this book contained Scripture and subject indexes. When the second printing occurs, I strongly suggest adding them.

I recommend this work as a helpful textbook on soteriology.

Robert N. Wilkin

Editor

Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society

Denton, Texas

Stand: A Call for the Endurance of the Saints.

Edited by John Piper and Justin Taylor. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2008. 157 pp. Paper, \$14.99.

The subtitle implies that this book might be on the Reformed doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints, the fifth point of Calvinism. While that doctrine does get brief discussion (cf. pp. 39-44), it is not the focus of this book. Instead, the focus is on perseverance as it relates to sanctification. That is why the subtitle speaks of endurance and not perseverance.

The authors include four well known and best-selling authors: John Piper, John MacArthur, Jerry Bridges, and Randy Alcorn. The other authors are Helen Roseveare and Justin Taylor (the co-editor).

The section by Piper dealing with the Reformed doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints, though very short (just 6 pages), is worth the price of the book. Piper's warns about two extremes: the "deadly [thinking that] perseverance is unnecessary...for final salvation" (p. 40) and the "deadly [thinking that] perseverance puts or keeps God on our side" (pp. 41-43).

I found this statement amazing: "So when the fear of not persevering raises its head, don't try to overcome it by saying, 'Oh, there is no danger, we don't need to persevere.' You do. There will be no salvation in the end for people who do not fight the good fight and finish the race and keep the faith and treasure Christ's appearing. And don't try to overcome the fear of not persevering by trying to win God's favor by your exertions in godliness" (p. 42). So what should eliminate the fear? Piper does not say! Calvinism has this way of saying contradictory things and assuming the audience will simply accept it.

Piper does say that "God's favor comes by grace alone, on the basis of Christ alone, in union with Christ alone, through faith alone, to the glory of God alone" (p. 42). Yet that doesn't answer the question of how the Calvinist deals with his fear that he is not one of the elect. The bottom line, unstated but understood, is that one lives with that fear until death, at which time he finds out whether he is born again or not.

In a section entitled, "Overcoming the Fear of Not Persevering," Piper says, "Therefore, perseverance is necessary for final salvation, and perseverance is certain for all those who are in Christ." But how does it help to know that *perseverance is certain for all those who are in Christ* if the only way one can know he is "in Christ" is by persevering till death? According to Calvinism and Scripture (e.g., 1 Cor 9:27; 2 Tim 2:12; 1 John 2:28) no one can be sure he will persevere to the end until his life is actually over. Piper's Calvinism leaves people fearful of not persevering and thus fearful that they may not be in Christ. Ironically the more a Calvinist focuses on his desire for

assurance, the more he fears spending eternity separated from God. The only real way a Calvinist can overcome the fear of not persevering is by keeping busy and not allowing his mind to obsess about his eternal destiny.

There is also an amazing discussion by Randy Alcorn of the sacrifices he made as a result of picketing an abortion clinic. He ended up resigning as pastor and only receiving minimum wages after this in order to avoid an abortion clinic receiving one-fourth of his salary. The entire discussion is very moving and well worth reading. While I'd read some of this before, it was powerfully written here (pp. 73-77).

Two of my favorite chapters in the book are not even called chapters. After the book ends there are two appendixes (not identified as such) in which Justin Taylor publishes his interview with all the authors excluding John MacArthur (pp. 115-27) and a separate interview of just John MacArthur and John Piper (pp. 129-45). These are excellent because the writers open up and talk about their backgrounds and their thinking and motivation.

There are some amazing statements from John MacArthur concerning his book *The Gospel According to Jesus*. For example, "I was so exercised because that 'no lordship' theology was coming out of the heritage (Dispensationalism) that was my heritage in a sense" (p. 129). "I was really not moving in Reformed circles at that time. I was a leaky dispensationalist. That was my world, and I realized that I was much more one of you (Reformed Covenant theology) than I was one of them" (p. 129).

Bridges, Acorn, and Roseveare do not seem nearly as Calvinistic or theological as Piper and MacArthur. I suppose the former agree with Reformed Lordship Salvation. However, that doesn't come out in this book.

This book is worth reading. I recommend it.

Robert N. Wilkin

Editor

Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society
Denton, Texas

Apocalypse 2012: The Ticking of the End Time Clock—What Does the Bible Say? By John Claeys. Sisters, OR: VMI Publishers, 2010. 275 pp. Paper, \$14.99.

Though Claeys does discuss the timing of Christ's return in the Epilogue (cf. pp. 209-19), the timing of the Rapture is not the focus of the book in spite of the fact that the title might imply that.

There are many outstanding aspects to this book. It defends the classic Dispensational view of Dan 9:24-27 (pp. 31-48). It has a nice discussion of the two witnesses in the first half of the Tribulation (pp. 49-56, 123-30) as well as of the 144,000 Jewish witnesses (pp. 57-64).

The discussion of Rev 17:8-11 is outstanding. Claeys lays out the first seven Roman emperors (p. 93), argues for a date of AD 68 for the writing of Revelation, and that the world ruler will be a man who suffers a mortal head wound and who is then possessed by the spirit of one of the first five Roman emperors, possibly Caesar Augustus (pp. 96-98).

Contrary to most expositors, Claeys suggests that the Antichrist will not be the world ruler, but will instead be the religious leader who helps the world ruler (pp. 131-40). He makes a very compelling case for this view (see esp. p. 138).

A common problem for Free Grace people is why there is a sort of perseverance of the saints in the Tribulation in that no Tribulation saint will take the mark of the beast. Claeys suggests that "undoubtedly, some believers will be tempted to receive the mark of the beast," yet God will keep them from doing so. One way he suggests is "by God causing their deaths before they can take that very wrong and disastrous step" (p. 145). This is an excellent point.

Discussion of two of the parables in the Olivet Discourse is masterfully done by the author. Claeys is careful to maintain a Free Grace understanding of these difficult texts (cf. pp. 27-30 re. Matt 24:45-51 and pp. 151-60 re. Matt 25:1-13).

While I think this is a very helpful book with much excellent content, I do have a few areas of disagreement. Of course, classic Dispensationalists have long had such disagreements and likely will continue to do so until the Lord returns.

I do not agree, for example, that Luke 21:24 was fulfilled when Israel took over control of Jerusalem in 1967 (pp. 211, 218-19).

That relates to a larger issue with which I disagree with the author. While this is a minor point in his book, it deserves attention.

I personally remain unconvinced by the author's suggestion that we can know today that we are within a few years of the Rapture (pp. 209-19). His brief handling of Mark 13:32 ("But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father") is hard to follow. He says that Jesus didn't know the time *then*, but Jesus is now at the right hand of the Father and thus "it is hard to believe Jesus does not now know when he will come in the air for us, since it seems unlikely that the Father has not revealed his plan to his Son since his exaltation" (p. 209). He then suggests that since Jesus now knows, we too can now know (p. 210).

It should be noted that Jesus in His deity obviously knew at the moment He made that statement when the Rapture would occur. God is omniscient and Jesus is God. Likely what Jesus meant is that at that moment in His humanity He chose not to tap into His divine knowledge.

Even if we grant the argument that the Lord Jesus didn't know *then*, but does know *now*, that in no way suggests that He has given us general revelation that allows us to know the time of His return.

Claeys refers to the fact that Israel took over control of Jerusalem in 1967 and that slightly over 40 years, a Biblical generation, have since passed. He writes, "This may indicate that God has graciously given us a few extra years to prepare for the return of Christ" (p. 219). Does he mean that the Rapture is at most a few years away?

Or does he simply mean it might occur in the next few years? If the former is intended (or even unintended, but understood by some readers in that way), then there is risk that if the Rapture does not occur in the next few years, the faith of some people will be shaken.

(In the Epilogue Claeys points to various current events which he thinks are indications that the Rapture is very close, including the return of the Jews to Israel, Israel's taking possession of Jerusalem, three Jewish groups preparing for the Messiah, momentum in Israel to rebuild the temple, the focus on peace and security and on a Middle East peace treaty, preparation for the king of the north, the ineffectiveness of the church, our location in church history, the financial crisis and moves toward a one-world currency, and Israel controlling Jerusalem.)

The Apostle John said in the first century, "Little children, it is the last hour" (1 John 2:18). Likewise, the Lord's brother James, possibly writing in AD 34, warned his readers, "Behold, the Judge [Jesus] is standing at the door!" (Jas 5:9). All of the NT writers believed that Jesus could well return in their lifetimes. All Bible-believing people of every generation should believe the Lord will likely return in their lifetimes. One of the men in our church loves to change a line in a song we sing called *Coming Again*. Rather than singing that it "may be soon," he changes it to "shall be soon." That is, of course, Biblically accurate. But it was soon 2,000 years ago, and if Jesus tarries another century, it will still be soon.

One of my seminary professors, a Jewish believer, said in a 1981 class on eschatology that if Israel were kicked out of the Promised Land tomorrow, his faith in Jesus' soon return would in no way be shaken. He pointed out that we cannot be sure that this is the final return of the Jewish people to Israel. There might be multiple exiles and multiple returns before the Rapture. That is certainly possible. There is no Scripture (not even Luke 21:24 in my opinion) that tells us one way or the other.

Unlike Claeys and many classic Dispensationalists, I believe that the coming of the Lord like a thief in the night (Matt 24:43; 1 Thess 5:2; 2 Pet 3:10; Rev 3:3; 16:15) means that there will be no signs of the Rapture, only signs of the Second Coming.

One other point deserves mention. Unfortunately there are no Scripture or subject indexes in this book. I found myself wanting to look up where the author discussed a passage, but being unable to do so. Hopefully in the second printing this will be rectified.

With a few minor caveats, I recommend this book highly. It is an excellent treatment of the Scriptures concerning the Rapture and Tribulation and it is a strong call to live in light of the Lord's soon return.

Robert N. Wilkin

Editor

Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society
Denton, Texas

Galatians 1 & 2: Exposition, Commentary, Application. By Laurence Vance. Pensacola, FL: Vance Publications, 2010. 154 pp. Paper, \$12.95.

It is a bit unusual to have a commentary of just the first two chapters of any book, let alone Galatians. However, Vance indicates in the Introduction that he started this work nine years ago and he now realizes he may not be able to finish the commentary on all of Galatians (p. xi). So his reason for this selection is sound. And he does point out that others have written on just these two chapters (footnotes 2 and 3 on p. xii).

The commentary discussion is helpful for the most part. For example, his comments on Gal 1:6-9 are very helpful in part and confusing in part. Helpful: The false gospel of the Judaizers “was not the denial of the historical facts

of the gospel that is here termed ‘**another gospel**,’ for that would never have been accepted by the Galatians, but rather additions to it” (p. 18). He goes on to suggest that the false gospel of the Judaizers was adding works to faith as co-conditions of justification. He cites modern examples such as “believe and be baptized,” “believe and keep the Sabbath,” and “believe and endure to the end” (p. 19). Confusing: He says of the anathema of Gal 1:8-9, “To be ‘**accursed**’ is to be devoted to divine instruction. This is because the consequences of trusting in a false gospel are eternal...It should be noted that Paul reserves these solemn words, not for atheists, agnostics, or infidels, but for professing Christians who pervert the gospel of Christ. Specifically, however, this curse applies only to those who ‘**preach any other gospel**,’ not to every Christian who mistakenly believes some false doctrine” (p. 23). It sounds like he is saying that if a “professing Christian” preaches a works salvation gospel, then he will go to hell. Whatever he means, this is not as clear as *JOTGES* readers would like.

Another example of the helpful and confusing is his discussion of Gal 2:16. (Vance devotes a whopping 13 pages to that one verse.) Helpful: “Here we have the first mention in Galatians (and therefore the first chronologically in the New Testament) of that great doctrine of justification by faith...[First] The doctrine of justification by faith without works [is] articulated in this verse. Second, to bring up the doctrine of justification by faith in such a casual manner, while at the same time maintaining that saved Jews know it to be true, indicates that it had to have been a regular object of Paul’s preaching and teaching” (p. 107). Confusing: “Just because a man knows these things to be true does not mean that he is saved. The gospel must be received, as James says: ‘**Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only**’ (Jas 1:22)” (p. 115). That is very confusing. But then he adds these words that help a bit, “Multitudes of people know of and believe in the virgin birth, the deity of Christ, and the

resurrection, but this does not make them Christians.” However, he then follows that with these words, which, taken out of context, are confusing: “It is ‘**as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God**’ (John 1:12).” Surprisingly he leaves off the end of John 1:12 which tells the reader what John means by “as many as received Him.” A bit later he makes this confusing statement: “The issue is, and always has been, Jesus Christ, for ‘**the devils also believe**’ (Jas 2:19) in God” (p. 117). Vance in a number of places selects difficult texts to quote (e.g., Jas 1:22; 2:19) in order to clarify his point. But the effect is confusion, for difficult texts need explanation, not mere quoting.

There is a very extensive (20 page) Bibliography in the back that is helpful (pp. 135-54).

A bit cumbersome is the author’s practice of quoting the entire verse under discussion at the top of each page. I do not mean merely putting something like Gal 2:16 at the top of the page. I mean that he writes out the entire verse, in the case of Gal 2:16 he puts all 57 words of that verse at the top of each page. He thus has a double header at the top of each page. I found this distracting, and a waste of a lot of space on each page.

I am torn on this commentary. In my estimation it is somewhat uneven in terms of the clarity and helpfulness of the comments to recommend it for a new believer or any believer who is not well versed in Free Grace theology. However, for the one who is well grounded and who already has several strong commentaries on Galatians (e.g., Longenecker, Ridderbos, Cole, Vos, Kent), this is a helpful addition to his commentary library.

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