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**A REVIEW OF J. B. HIXSON'S**  
***GETTING THE GOSPEL WRONG:***  
***THE EVANGELICAL CRISIS NO ONE IS***  
***TALKING ABOUT***<sup>1</sup>

**BY BOB WILKIN**

I. INTRODUCTION

I've known J. B. Hixson since his early days as a seminary student at Dallas Theological Seminary. We've been friends for a long time.

Hixson is the Executive Director of the Free Grace Alliance (FGA), which he promotes at the end of the book (p. 405).

Slightly more than half of the endorsers are members of the FGA. More tellingly, five of the seven members of the FGA Executive Council are endorsers,<sup>2</sup> including President Charlie Bing, President Elect Fred Chay, Vice President Fred Lybrand, Treasurer Phil Congdon, and Member-at-Large Larry Moyer.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the Founding President Emeritus of the FGA, Dr. Earl Radmacher, is the lead endorser who wrote the foreword to the book. (However, Dr. Radmacher asked me to mention in my review that the version of the book he endorsed did not contain the four-page endnote on pages 152-55 which is highly critical of Zane Hodges, me, and GES.) While the FGA is not the publisher, it appears that this is a book which the FGA heartily endorses.

This work is Hixson's doctoral dissertation. He completed his doctorate in 2007 at Baptist Bible Seminary in Clarks Summit, PA. While

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<sup>1</sup> J. B. Hixson, *Getting the Gospel Wrong: The Evangelical Crisis No One Is Talking About*, NP: Xulon Press, 2008. 405 pp. Paper, \$21.99.

<sup>2</sup> Actually one could say that six of the eight FGA Executive Council members endorse this book if you count Hixson who is on the Council.

<sup>3</sup> Hixson, pp. v-xi. See [http://www.freegracealliance.com/about\\_leadership.php](http://www.freegracealliance.com/about_leadership.php) for a list of the current FGA Executive Committee. Accessed July 18, 2008.

there is some new material added (e.g., endnote 19 on pp. 152-55) most of the material is word for word what he wrote in his dissertation.

Though the book is written by a long-time friend, and though it represents the view of an organization that calls itself Free Grace, this book is a direct assault on GES and its view that all who simply believe in the Lord Jesus Christ have eternal life that can never be lost.<sup>4</sup> It is, however, a very poorly devised attack as we shall soon see.

## II. STRENGTHS OF *GETTING THE GOSPEL WRONG*: HIXSON'S FIVE<sup>5</sup> FALSE GOSPELS

Hixson is not afraid to take on some of the biggest names in evangelicalism today, including Billy Graham, Rick Warren, Joel Osteen, T. D. Jakes, and Brian McLaren. He is to be commended for giving examples from leading Evangelicals of the false gospels he confronts.

Most *JOTGES* readers will find themselves in agreement with his discussion of “The Purpose Gospel” (pp. 195-222), “The Puzzling Gospel” (pp. 223-52), “The Prosperity Gospel” (pp. 253-76), “The Pluralistic Gospel” (pp. 277-300), and “The Performance Gospel” (pp. 301-30). Indeed, if that was all there was in this book, it might be a helpful addition to Free Grace literature.<sup>6</sup>

*The purpose gospel* is characterized by underemphasizing and redefining sin, by overemphasizing the present life while “it downplays or ignores entirely the eternal aspect of salvation” (p. 198), and by having a lack of a sense of urgency.

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<sup>4</sup> See Chapter 3 and especially the four-page endnote on pages 152-55 where Hixson directly mentions GES in a negative light. Indeed, it is clear from that endnote that Hixson is charging GES with proclaiming a false gospel (Gal 1:6-9). In his view a person is not born again simply by believing in Jesus Christ. He calls that a false gospel.

<sup>5</sup> Actually, as we shall see, Hixson identifies the message that all who simply believe in Jesus for eternal life have it, the message of GES, as a sixth false gospel (p. 155 n. 19).

<sup>6</sup> Of course, even if it only contained those chapters, there would still be plenty of technical errors in the book that would need correcting before it was ready for publication. In addition, there would also remain the glaring problem, discussed below, that Hixson evaluates each of these gospels not against Scripture, but instead against his own synthesis.

Hixson calls his second false gospel *the puzzling gospel* for this reason: "Many gospel presentations are puzzling since they invoke such generic phrases as 'Come to Jesus,' 'Give your life to Him,' 'Invite Him into your heart,' 'Turn your life over to Christ,' etc." (p. 223). Hixson suggests appeals like this "are vague and unhelpful in the absence of sufficiently clarifying explanation" (p. 223).<sup>7</sup>

The author's major criticism of *the prosperity gospel* is identical to his major criticism of the purpose gospel, emphasizing the present life while underemphasizing or ignoring the life to come.<sup>8</sup>

Hixson's rejection of the purpose and puzzling gospels was rather mild. He reacted more negatively to the prosperity gospel. However, his critique of the fourth false gospel, *the pluralistic gospel*, is by far the strongest. Hixson strongly rejects the idea that all religions are equally valid and equally successful paths to the kingdom of God. Hixson stresses that only Christianity and only faith in Jesus Christ will give someone eternal life (p. 278).

His reaction to the fifth false gospel, *the performance gospel*, is as follows:

It is axiomatic that postmodernism's proclivity for moral relativism has made disturbing inroads into the church. So much so, that in many cases, it is difficult to distinguish between the world and the church. Understandably, this has many evangelicals concerned about the state of the church and passionate about moral reform. Indeed *all evangelicals* should stand united in calling God's people to moral purity and godliness. In such a context, however, some evangelical leaders seem bent on adopting a soteriological method that makes man's entrance into heaven contingent to varying degrees upon his own good behavior (p. 321, italics his).

Hixson's discussion of all five false gospels is generally on target.

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<sup>7</sup> For more on puzzling unbiblical appeals, see Bob Wilkin, "The Subtle Danger of the Imprecise Gospel," *JOTGES* (Spring 1997): 41-60. AWANA ministries have also been speaking out about imprecise gospel invitations for years.

<sup>8</sup> For example, Hixson says, "Osteen is more concerned with living life now, not what [sic] awaits individuals on the other side of the grave" (p. 258, italics his). Evidently Hixson meant to say that Osteen is more concerned with living life now than with what awaits individuals on the other side of the grave.

### III. TECHNICAL ERRORS

Many technical errors are found in this book. These errors reflect a lack of attention to detail that permeates everything in the book, including the exegesis and theology.

#### A. SPELLING ERRORS

There are numerous spelling errors including “Foreward” instead of “Foreword” (cover, pp. i, xvii),<sup>9</sup> postrequisite,<sup>10</sup> and Christ’s name misspelled in Greek as “Χριστος.”

On several occasions Hixson fails to hyphenate a Greek word that he breaks between two lines (pp. 92, 108).

Hixson is extremely inconsistent in the way he abbreviates states. Common practice in scholarly literature is to use the two letter postal codes. Hixson does this at times. However, he employs at least three other methods in this book as well. He sometimes uses two capital letters, each followed by a period (e.g., N.J.).<sup>11</sup> At other times he uses two letters, the first capitalized and the second lower case followed by a period (e.g., Pa. and Az.).<sup>12</sup> And sometimes he uses three or four letters followed by a period (e.g., Tex.,<sup>13</sup> Cal. [pp. 67, 375], Mass. [p. 380], Minn. [p. 381], and Tenn. [p. 397]).

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<sup>9</sup> If Hixson used a computer in writing this book, it should have identified Foreward as a misspelled word. Spell checking the document should have revealed the error as well. This is, actually, an archaic word, but it is not a word in current usage and in any case it does not now mean, nor has it ever meant, the preface to a book.

<sup>10</sup> Hixson, pp. 32, 301, 302 (2xs), 312, 314 (2xs), 317, 318, 321, 339, 371, and 372. Again, the computer flags this word as misspelled. I realize that Hixson is attempting to coin a new word here. However, it would have been much better to simply use an actual word.

<sup>11</sup> E.g., see Hixson, pp. 156, 189, 325, 378, 384, 397, 398. Once he abbreviates New Jersey differently, giving the common form NJ (p. 362).

<sup>12</sup> See notes 16-18 for details.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 75, 155, 159, 171, 179 (2xs), 182 (2xs), 375, 384, 395 (4xs), 396 (2xs).

More puzzling is the fact that he varies the way he abbreviates individual states. For example, he abbreviates Texas, Pennsylvania, and Arizona, as Tex.<sup>14</sup> or TX,<sup>15</sup> Pa.<sup>16</sup> or PA,<sup>17</sup> and Az., AZ., or AZ,<sup>18</sup> respectively.

## B. ATTRIBUTION ERRORS

Fair citation of someone's words requires that the individual be identified in the text along with their quote. Yet Hixson more than half the time fails to indicate in his text the identity of the person he is quoting,<sup>19</sup> even when he gives extended block quotes that contain one or more paragraphs.<sup>20</sup> Since most do not take the time to read endnotes, most readers gain the impression that unless Hixson provides attribution, the quote is from something Hixson himself wrote or said.<sup>21</sup>

## C. TAKING QUOTES OUT OF CONTEXT

Hixson is guilty of taking snippets out of what someone wrote and presenting them without their context. For example, consider the

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp. vi (2xs), viii, ix (2xs), x (4xs), xi, xvi (3xs).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., pp. 74, 175, 186, 376, 380.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., pp. v, viii, 401.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., pp. 276 (Az.), 163 (AZ.), vii (AZ).

<sup>19</sup> For example, in Chapter 3 there are 152 endnotes. Of the first 50, 27 represent material Hixson wrote himself and chose to put in notes. Those are endnotes 2, 6, 7, 8-10, 12, 13, 16-19, 24, 27-30, 32, 34, 36, 39, 41, 43-45, 48, and 50. Of the other 23 citations, there are 14 where he fails to state in the text the person he's quoting (endnotes, 3, 11, 14, 20, 22, 23, 26, 31, 33, 40, 42, 46, and 49). Only nine times—less than half the time!—does Hixson indicate the source of the quote in the text (endnotes 1, 4, 5, 15, 25, 35, 37, 38, and 47).

<sup>20</sup> For example, Hixson gives no attribution in the text before a three-page long quote from a journal article he cites (p. 180 n. 105), which takes up parts of two pages in his book (pp. 127-28). However, awkwardly after the block quote he writes, "As Hodges suggests..." (p. 128).

<sup>21</sup> The reason this is not considered fair use of an author's words is that it requires the reader while reading a passage to go to the end of the chapter and find the right endnote in order to see who actually made the comment. This is needlessly time consuming and studies show only about 1 in 100 people will do it. The net effect is to minimize the contributions of others. This repeated failure to give credit in the text to people he is quoting is disturbing, unscholarly, and unfair.

following quote from John MacArthur's book *The Gospel According to Jesus*, which appears on page 115 of Hixson's book:

[F]aith encompasses obedience.... Modern popular theology tends to recognize *notitia* and often *assensus* but eliminate [*sic*] *fiducia*. Yet faith is not complete until it is obedient....The real believer will obey.... A concept of faith that excludes obedience corrupts the message of salvation.... Clearly, the Biblical concept of faith is inseparable from obedience.... Obedience is the inevitable manifestation of true faith.

Notice all of the ellipsis marks (...).<sup>22</sup> Typically those are used to cut out extraneous information that isn't crucial. For example, an author might leave out a laundry list of Scripture passages if he feels that it isn't central to what the individual he is quoting is saying.

However, the endnote here gives a clue to what Hixson did. Hixson took this quote from three pages in MacArthur's book (pp. 173-75 in the first edition of the book, though Hixson on p. 169 n. 72 mistakenly says it appears on those pages in the revised and expanded edition!). There is no way that Hixson's choppy citation of MacArthur fairly gives the context of *three pages!*<sup>23</sup>

It turns out that what Hixson did for the most part was give the first sentence of a paragraph and then leave out the rest! At best, this is an inappropriate treatment of someone's writings. While I disagree with what MacArthur is saying, he is entitled to a fair presentation of what he actually wrote.

#### D. MISCONSTRUING THE WORDS OF OTHERS.

Worse yet is what Hixson did with the words of Zane Hodges. Concerning Hodges he says, "Hodges refers to the traditional view of the

<sup>22</sup> Yes, Hixson used four dots, not three. While this is not the simplest way to handle ellipses, this is one of the acceptable methods according to The Chicago Manual of Style (11.55-65).

<sup>23</sup> This practice of condensing multiple pages into one paragraph occurs again in the very next quote on p. 115. If one takes the time to read Hixson's endnote (p. 170 n. 73), he learns the material cited took up three pages in the original. Yet the quote is just ten lines long in Hixson's text! Three times material is left out as indicated by ellipsis marks. Evidently Hixson again left out huge chunks of material in each of these three places. That isn't fair to the author or the reader.

gospel, as including the death and resurrection of Christ, as 'flawed'" (p. 152 n.19). It is poor scholarship to put one word, in this case *flawed*, in quotes. That is an extreme example of what is meant by taking something out of context.<sup>24</sup>

Hodges actually wrote, "Let me say this: All forms of the gospel that require greater content to faith in Christ than that Gospel of John requires, are flawed."<sup>25</sup> It is true that a few paragraphs after making the charge about Hodges, Hixson does give that very quote. However, Hixson does so to show that Hodges and others have "an unbalanced appeal to the priority of the Johannine Gospel," (p. 153, n. 19), not to explain what Hodges meant about flawed presentations.

In order to represent Hodges fairly, Hixson not only should have given the full sentence containing the word *flawed*, but he also should have cited the following words by Hodges from the same article since they are crucial to understanding what Hodges believes: "I find it not only useful, but indeed essential, to explain that the Lord Jesus Christ bought our way to heaven by paying for all our sins."<sup>26</sup> However, instead of doing that, Hixson slanders Hodges and claims that "According to Hodges, details such as who Jesus is (i.e. [*sic*] the Son of God) and His work on the cross are not relevant to the precise content of saving faith" (p. 153 n. 19). If Hodges says he considers the preaching of the cross *essential*, then how on earth can Hixson claim he believes *the cross is not relevant*? Hixson has grossly misrepresented what Hodges wrote. The integrity with which Hixson treats sources is startlingly poor.

#### E. WRONGLY CATEGORIZING LITERATURE

In the bibliography the word *Monographs* appears before a list, not of monographs but of books (pp. 375-84). Not a single book in the 99 books listed by Hixson is accurately called a monograph. Indeed Hixson even lists *two booklets* as monographs!<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Amazingly, Hixson even cited the wrong article! Hixson on p. 152 (n. 19) says that Hodges made this claim in the second of a two-part article he wrote. Yet the word *flawed* doesn't appear in that article at all. It appears in part 1 (see the next note). This is another example of irresponsible reporting.

<sup>25</sup> Zane C. Hodges, "How to Lead People to Christ, Part 1" *JOTGES* (Autumn 2000): p. 8.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Zane Hodges's *Dead Faith: What Is It?* (p. 378) and Dennis Rokser's *Seven Reasons Not to Ask Jesus into Your Heart* (p. 381).

#### F. REPEATEDLY GIVING INCORRECT BOOK TITLES

I don't recall ever finding an author misstating the title of a book. Yet after I found a handful of titles Hixson inaccurately cited,<sup>28</sup> I decided to check out some of the books in his Bibliography. By my count he misstates the titles of more than a dozen.<sup>29</sup> Somewhat comically, the subtitle of Charles Ryrie's well known book *Basic Theology* is given as "A Popular Systemic Guide to Understanding Biblical Truth (p. 147, n. 1, underlining added). The correct word is *Systematic*, not *Systemic*! Dr. Ryrie isn't that kind of doctor!

#### G. NO SCRIPTURE OR SUBJECT INDEX

It is very helpful in a book which cites many authors and much Scripture to have indexes. That Hixson's book lacks these indexes greatly weakens its usefulness.

#### H. HALF OF THE HEADERS ARE WRONG

After the table of contents, all of the headers on the left hand pages normally give the title of the book, while all of the right hand pages give the title of the chapter under discussion. This book gives the *title* of the

<sup>28</sup> He leaves the question marks off book titles by Walter Chantry (p. 376), John MacArthur (p. 327 n. 32), and Gordon Clark (pp. 167 n. 67, 169 n. 71, 192 n. 152). He once fails to capitalize the first word in Jody Dillow's book *The Reign of the Servant Kings* (p. 159, n. 32, second reference). He repeatedly leaves the comma off the subtitle of John MacArthur's book *The Gospel According to Jesus: What Does Jesus Mean He Says, "Follow Me"?* (pp. 169 n. 72, 176 n. 88, 177 n. 93, 184 n. 127, 189 n. 142, 190 n. 144, 323 n. 3, 327 n. 32, 379, twice). Hixson also leaves the last four words off the title of my dissertation (p. 401). He also once leaves the question mark off of the title of one of the most famous booklets of our day, *Have You Heard of the Four Spiritual Laws?* (p. 326 n. 20).

<sup>29</sup> For example, in the Bibliography he misstates the titles or subtitles of books by the following authors (if there is only one listed, I just list the author; if more than one, I give an abbreviated title): David Barton (p. 375), James Montgomery Boice (p. 375), Walter Chantry (p. 376), R. Alan Day (p. 377), Gordon Fee and Douglas Stewart (p. 378), T. D. Jakes, *Loose That Man & Let Him Go* (p. 379), John MacArthur, *The Keys to Spiritual Growth* and *The Gospel According to Jesus*, 1989 and 1994 editions (p. 379), Brian McLaren (p. 380), Charles Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (p. 382), R. C. Sproul, *Before the Face of God: Book One, Before the Face of God: Book Four*, and *Before the Face of God: Book Three* (p. 382, and yes, Hixson inexplicably lists Book Four before he lists Book Three), and John Stackhouse, *No Other Gods Before Me?* (p. 383).

book as the header on both sides. The reader looking for a chapter in the headers will be frustrated since it isn't to be found.

### I. PLAGIARIZING THE WORDS OF GES

*Last words are lasting words*, the saying goes. That is especially true for the last words of the conclusion of an entire book. Yet the concluding words in the chapter entitled, "Summary and Conclusion," are not the author's own words at all. Hixson concludes with this statement which is entirely without attribution:

No act of obedience, preceding or following faith in Jesus Christ, such as a promise to obey, repentance of sin, pledge of obedience or surrendering to the Lordship of Christ, may be added to, or considered a part of, faith as a condition for receiving eternal life (pp. 339-40, underlining added).

Yet that is almost verbatim what the GES Affirmations say:

No act of obedience, preceding or following faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, such as commitment to obey, sorrow for sin, turning from one's sin, baptism or submission to the Lordship of Christ, may be added to, or considered part of, faith as a condition for receiving everlasting life"(underlining added).<sup>30</sup>

However minor, this is still a form of plagiarism that is of questionable integrity.<sup>31</sup>

### J. SUMMARY

How all these errors we have noted ever escaped the attention of Hixson himself, his dissertation readers, his book editor, his FGA endorsers, and those who proofed the book for him, is hard to imagine. These errors alone show that this book was not ready for publication. Hixson should not have rushed this book into print before he exercised due diligence.

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<sup>30</sup> See <http://www.faithalone.org/about/index.html> and then click on Affirmations of Belief. Look at the third paragraph under the first heading, "Salvation."

<sup>31</sup> Regardless of how this happened, it further illustrates the lack of due diligence taken in the writing of this book.

#### IV. A MAJOR MISSTATEMENT: THE ACCEPTED VIEW OF THE GOSPEL FOR 2000 YEARS?

Hixson speaks favorably of “the accepted view of the gospel throughout two thousand years of church history” (p. 152 n. 19).<sup>32</sup> Such a statement is laughably false. No one who has studied church history thinks that there has been some accepted view of the gospel for the first 2,000 years of church history. Certainly since the Reformation there hasn’t been one accepted view. However, even before the Reformation there was not one accepted view.

Hixson speaks as though anyone could turn to a book on church history and find a statement on *the accepted view of the gospel*. He gives the impression that you could walk up to any minister, priest, or pastor of any group or denomination today and they’d all be able to tell you the accepted view of the gospel.

Free Grace Theology does not consider the gospel of Rome, which is certainly *one of the views of the gospel*, to be the Biblical gospel. Nor do we consider the gospel of Mormonism, Arminianism, Calvinism, or Unitarianism, *four other views of the gospel*, to be the Biblical gospel.

Hixson, of course, doesn’t cite any evidence that there ever has been “an accepted view of the gospel.” The very idea is preposterous.<sup>33</sup>

#### V. THEOLOGICAL ERRORS

##### A. SPEAKING POSITIVELY OF CALLING FOR A DECISION

While criticizing a website, Hixson makes this comment: “Even Got-life.org, which at least calls for a decision on the part of the viewers, downplays the urgency by suggesting that the only consequence of failing to get life, is continued lack of personal fulfillment and a prolonged feeling of isolation” (p. 213, italics his; underlining added). The portion underlined shows that Hixson feels it is appropriate to call for a decision.

<sup>32</sup> In fact, in the context he is lambasting Zane Hodges, John Niemelä, and me for rejection of it.

<sup>33</sup> In addition, it is hard to reconcile this claim by Hixson with the fact that he has five chapters exposing modern day false gospels. Does Hixson believe that those false gospels today agree with “the accepted view of the gospel throughout two thousand years of church history”?

Yet there is no proof elsewhere in the book that faith is a decision<sup>34</sup> or in what sense a person must decide anything to be born again.

Most Free Grace people do not call for the unbeliever to decide to do anything. Rather, Free Grace people make it clear that all who simply believe in Jesus have everlasting life that can never be lost.

## B. IMPLYING PROFESSIONS OF FAITH ARE REQUIRED FOR ETERNAL LIFE

Note Hixson's summary statement about John 20:31:

The object of saving faith, then, must include the essential truth that Jesus is *the Son of God who died and rose again*. This does not mean that one must affirm a fully-developed doctrine of the deity of Christ with all of its theological intricacies; nor does it mean that one must explicitly articulate the phrase *deity of Christ as part of his profession of faith*. Rather, believing in Jesus as the Son of God means understanding that Jesus is who He says He is: the divine Son of God who alone can forgive sin and grant eternal life (cf. John 11:25-27) (pp. 89-90, italics his; underlining added).

By using words like *affirm*, *articulate*, and *profession*, Hixson seems to be implying that one must make some sort of profession of faith to be born again. This profession must evidently include an affirmation of one's belief in the deity of Christ. Precisely what someone must affirm and profess about the deity of Christ is never stated by Hixson (or the apostle John!).<sup>35</sup>

Is Hixson's terminology merely careless here, so that no affirmation is really required? This type of imprecision leaves Hixson's basic theology obscure.

A few pages earlier, while discussing saving faith, he writes as well:

A profession of saving faith zeroes in on the correct kernel of salvific truth within the broader good news about man's salva-

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<sup>34</sup> In fact, this cannot be proven since faith is not a decision. It is a conviction that something is true. For more discussion on this point see my book *Confident in Christ*, pp. 6-7, 248 n. 8.

<sup>35</sup> Actually John makes it clear that no profession of any kind is required. See John 12:42-43. Nicodemus is given in John's Gospel as an example of the secret believer (cf. John 3:2; 7:50; 19:38-40). In the Fourth Gospel believing in Jesus for eternal life, not affirming His deity or other truths, is the sole condition of eternal life (e.g., John 3:16; 5:24; 6:35, 47; 11:25-27).

tion...In the course of explaining the gospel, at some point the moment comes when, having sufficiently addressed man's predicament and God's provision, the sinner is ready for specific instruction on how to appropriate God's free gift of eternal life by professing faith in someone or something" (p. 84, italics his; underlining added).

Note that Hixson here states without qualification that the appropriation of God's free gift of eternal life is "by professing faith." He doesn't say that it is *by believing*, but *by professing one's belief!* What is this supposed to mean? The theology here is muddy, to say the least.

### C. IMPLYING THE ROMANS ROAD <sup>36</sup> IS A FINE APPROACH

In a passing comment about various options that Biblically-sound evangelists have, Hixson makes this interesting comment: "Some evangelists might employ evidentiary apologetics; others might use the Romans Roadmap" (p. 85). It is hard to imagine what he means by "the Romans Roadmap" other than the famous Romans Road approach.

While there are a number of slightly different Romans Road approaches, nearly all of them end in Rom 10:9-10 and a call for the listener to both believe in Jesus with their heart and to confess him with their mouths.

Yet later in the book Hixson specifically rejects the view that Rom 10:9-10 is teaching the need to confess Christ publicly to be born again (pp. 219-21 n. 46).<sup>37</sup> While that is certainly good, it is perplexing that he would speak favorably of the Romans "Roadmap" approach at all, especially without at least giving a disclaimer about how it typically ends in a faulty explanation of Rom 10:9-10 and in a faith-plus-confession condition for eternal life.

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<sup>36</sup> This is also referred to in the literature as the Roman Road and the Roman's Road.

<sup>37</sup> See also p. 212 which is where Hixson makes this statement, to which n. 46 refers: "Nowhere does Scripture demand verbal declaration of one's faith as a requirement to gain eternal life." Hixson contradicts his earlier statements on the necessity of a profession of faith. This is another example of the lack of precision in Hixson's theology and in his writing.

#### D. STATING THE OBJECT OF SAVING FAITH DIFFERENTLY AT THE START AND END OF CHAPTER 3

Another problem is that Hixson gives two significantly different statements about the content of saving faith. For example, in his summary at the end of the third chapter, Hixson puts the saving message this way:

Saving faith occurs when one believes in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who died and rose again to pay his *personal* penalty for sin, as the only One who can give him eternal life (p. 146, italics his; underlining added).<sup>38</sup>

Compare that statement with the statement at the beginning of the chapter:

Saving faith is the belief in Jesus Christ as the Son of God who died and rose again to pay one's personal penalty for sin and [as] the one [sic] who gives eternal life to all who trust Him and Him alone for it (p. 84, italics his; underlining added).

Those two statements are not saying the same thing. In one someone must believe in Jesus Christ as the One *who gives eternal life* to all who trust Him and Him alone for it. In the other a person must merely believe in Jesus Christ as the only One *who can give him eternal life*.

Does Hixson mean that an individual need not believe that Jesus actually gives eternal life to the one who believes the saving message? Does he mean that the person must merely believe that Jesus *is able to give* ("can give") him that life?

Hixson's theology of the saving message is exceedingly obscure. An unbeliever confronted with Hixson's formulations would have good reason to be confused!

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<sup>38</sup> See also pp. 370-71 where Hixson somewhat similarly says the following in his definition of gospel: "A term used generally in Scripture to refer to any good news. With reference to salvation, it refers to the good news that one who believes in Jesus Christ alone as the Son of God who died and rose again to pay his personal penalty for sin may have eternal life" (italics added).

### E. ONLY A PERFECT EVANGELISTIC PRESENTATION IS ABLE TO SAVE!

Hixson says, “Even the slightest alteration to the Biblical gospel renders it impotent to save” (p. 43). That is an amazing charge for which he gives no Biblical support. He just assumes the reader will accept this as true because he says it is true. Maybe he thinks this is a *self-evident* truth. But it isn’t self-evident to anyone I’ve ever met. I’ve never heard a single person ever make such a claim.

Hixson has an endnote associated with this claim, which reads in part:

Some might object<sup>39</sup> to the use of the phrase impotent to save when describing a false gospel. After all, the objection goes, isn’t salvation the sole work of God and can’t God save anyone regardless of the sloppiness or inaccuracy of the gospel presentation? In an absolute sense, this is true. Indeed God is sovereign over all things. Ultimately those whom God has chosen will be saved and those whom He has not will not, and nothing can change this. But this theological reality does not mitigate man’s responsibility to preach a sound gospel. Nor does the objection properly take into account the fact that God’s sovereign plan of salvation includes man’s witness to the gospel... (pp. 71-72 n. 27, italics his).

Hixson says in that endnote that all false gospels are impotent to save. He labels six different messages as false gospels in his book. According to Hixson two of the six false gospels are the message of Lordship Salvation, which he calls *the performance gospel*, and the message of Zane Hodges, me, and GES, which he calls *the promise-only gospel*, *the crossless gospel*, or *the content-less gospel* (p. 152-55 n. 19). Hixson explicitly says that our message is a false gospel (p. 155 n. 19) and thus the conclusion is inescapable that he is saying that our message is impotent to save (pp. 43, 71).

I have written and said, and so has Zane Hodges, that any message which so much as quotes John 3:16 or a similar verse such as John 5:24; 6:35, 47; 11:25-27, or even a message that shares the idea that the one

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<sup>39</sup> I had to laugh when I read “some might object...” This is quite an understatement. It would have been more accurate to say, “Few if any will agree with the use of the phrase *impotent to save* when describing a false gospel...”

who believes in Jesus has everlasting life, no matter how garbled, could result in a person being born again. There is not a single verse in the Bible which says what Hixson trumpets: "Even the slightest alteration to the Biblical gospel renders it impotent to save" (p. 43).<sup>40</sup> People are able to filter out error. The Spirit can and does help people cut through the clutter. Of course, the more garbled the message, the less likely anyone will be born again when listening to it.

But to say that a garbled message is *impotent to save* is akin to saying that God Himself is impotent to save unless the evangelist shares precisely the correct message. But wait! That is exactly what Hixson said in his endnote: "God's sovereign plan of salvation includes man's witness to the gospel" (p. 72 n. 27). Even the slightest alteration of the Biblical gospel ties God's hands and keeps the listener from being born again unless and until he hears what Hixson calls *the pure gospel*.

So what if Hixson himself is slightly off concerning what the Biblical gospel is? For example, what if the Biblical gospel does not actually contain the word *personal* as in Hixson's claim that one must believe that "Jesus Christ, the Son of God...died and rose again to pay his *personal* penalty for sin" (italics added)?<sup>41</sup> Then the message Hixson proclaims is, by his own admission, *impotent to save*.

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<sup>40</sup> The charge that a person cannot be born again if he fails to understand some gospel truths is actually inconsistent with Hixson's own claim that one need not believe Paul's entire gospel to be born again (pp. 80-81)! Well, if a person can believe an altered version of Paul's gospel and still be born again, then whose gospel do they need to get just right? What is this Biblical gospel of which Hixson speaks that is the only message able to save? Where do we find it in Scripture? If we must believe that precise message to be born again, wouldn't God lay out that message for us somewhere word for word? If He did, then the wise evangelist would merely memorize and quote that text every time he evangelized. He would say not a word more or less since any alteration to the Biblical gospel renders it impotent to save.

<sup>41</sup> After all, it could be argued that the Bible teaches that Jesus died for the sins of the whole world as John 1:29; 3:16; and 1 John 2:2 all state. If that is part of the Biblical gospel, then Hixson has altered, at least slightly, the gospel, and hence his message would be impotent to save according to his own theology.

Or, what if the burial of Jesus is part of the Biblical gospel as Paul says it is in 1 Cor 15:4?<sup>42</sup> When discussing 1 Cor 15:1-8, Hixson indicates that the burial of Jesus is not part of the Biblical gospel (pp. 80-81).<sup>43</sup> But if Jesus' burial is part of the Biblical gospel, then Hixson's message is an altered gospel and is thus *impotent to save* (cf. pp. 43, 80-81).

It is easy to see why people would be afraid to share their faith if they believed what Hixson says about the impotence of any imperfect evangelistic presentation. Anyone proclaiming an imperfect message is proclaiming a false gospel according to Hixson. And Paul makes clear that anyone preaching a false gospel is under the curse of God (Gal 1:8-9). According to Hixson, any alteration, no matter how minor, of the Biblical gospel is impotent to save and is a false gospel. Thus unless you get the message word perfect, you are a fool for trying to lead someone to faith in Christ. You cannot help anyone else unless you say everything just so. And, if you mess up even slightly in what you say, you put yourself under God's curse!

This may be one of Hixson's most radical suggestions. And it is linked with his understanding of election, which is extremely Calvinistic, to say the least. In his discussion of election on pages 71-72 Hixson sounds like a five-point Calvinist.

## VI. EXEGETICAL ERRORS

### A. THE GOSPEL OF JOHN RECEIVES VERY LITTLE DISCUSSION

In his chapter on the pure gospel (Chapter 3), Hixson does mention John 20:30-31 and he does indicate that it is the purpose statement of the book (pp. 85, 87). He links his discussion of the purpose statement with John 11:25-27 (p. 89).

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<sup>42</sup> One blogger calls the view that Hixson advocates *the groundless gospel*. See Jonathan Perrault, <http://freegracefreespeech.blogspot.com>, s.v. "FGFS Index/The Tragedy of the Groundless Gospel."

<sup>43</sup> Hixson does not explicitly say this. However, he says, "Paul does not intend to include all nine of these facts [in 1 Cor 15:1-8] as part of the precise content of saving faith" (p. 80). Since one of those nine facts is Jesus' burial, and since he never lists it as an essential truth, it's clear he doesn't consider it part of what he calls the Biblical gospel.

However, Hixson only devotes about two pages (pp. 86-87 and the top of page 88) to a discussion of the role of the Gospel of John in determining our view of the saving message today. In fact, even before he began this short discussion, on page 85 he placed an endnote (n. 19 which appears on pp. 152-55) which indicates that it is wrong to place too much importance on the Gospel of John in answering this question. Concerning Hodges, me, and others, Hixson says, "Their theological method manifests several errors such as [1] an unbalanced appeal to the priority of the Johannine Gospel" (p. 153 n. 19). What is *a balanced appeal to the priority of the Johannine Gospel*? Hixson appears to have erred here, for in light of all he writes in his book, *no appeal* to the priority of John's Gospel is correct. John's Gospel not only is not to be given priority, it is to be corrected by the epistles since John's Gospel contains a message for a prior age, not for today.

Hixson seems to think the number-one evangelistic error anyone can make is to emphasize the Gospel of John. Evidently he feels it is unbalanced to say that John's Gospel is the only evangelistic book in the Bible. Thus it is illegitimate in his view to suggest that John's Gospel is *the book* to study to determine the saving message! Mark me down as guilty as charged.

Hixson's abandonment of the Gospel of John leads him to conclusions that not only are inconsistent with it, but also with the entire Bible. Once someone abandons the primacy of John's Gospel for evangelism, he is like a driver who throws his GPS out the window. He should not be surprised if he winds up far from his desired destination.

## B. WHY DIDN'T JESUS INDICATE THAT HIS MESSAGE WOULD NO LONGER BE SUFFICIENT?

Hixson advocates the view that what one must believe to be born again changed after Jesus' death on the cross and resurrection from the dead (pp. 153 n. 19, 157 n. 28). However, this claim is arbitrary and totally unsupported by Scripture. It has not a shred of support from the Lord Jesus Himself, nor from the apostle John who wrote *long after* these imaginary *new requirements* would have become necessary. Hixson's claim here is an egregious theological error.

Did the Lord know about this coming change? If He did, why did He fail to tell the apostles, either before or after His resurrection?

Did the apostles know about this change after it occurred? If so, why didn't they tell us about it either?

This isn't Biblical theology. If it were, we would see it in the teachings of our Lord and of His apostles.

Hixson is obviously aware that John's Gospel was written well after Jesus' death and resurrection. Hixson recognizes that John is writing to people in the church age to tell them what they must believe to be born again (pp. 85, 127, 129, 285). John holds up the faith of Jesus' disciples before the cross as models for how his readers too can be born again (John 1:41, 45, 49; 2:11; 6:69). This contradicts Hixson's unsupportable theology.

It is truly a self-refuting idea that believers today must believe more than the apostles did to be born again. Scripture nowhere says so. The claim that it does is spurious and ignores the foundational role of the apostles for the Christian faith (Eph 2:19-20; Matt 16:15-18).

### C. DOES GOD HIDE THE SAVING MESSAGE IN A *SYNTHESIS*?

One of the most repeated expressions in the entire book is "the five-fold standard of the gospel" (22, 146, 195, 205, 306, 307, 309), also called "the (five) core essentials of saving faith" (xxii [2x], 41, 100, 103, 266), and "the five essentials" (p. 102).<sup>44</sup> The expression *the five-fold standard of the gospel* is quite telling for in this book Hixson evaluates all gospels against this five-fold standard, rather than against Scripture.<sup>45</sup> Hixson's five-fold standard is really his own creation and not a Scriptural concept at all.

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<sup>44</sup> Some of Hixson's five essentials are not even found in John's Gospel. Nowhere in John is the idea of Jesus paying *one's personal penalty* for sin (Hixson's third essential) mentioned, let alone discussed. And there is not a single place where Jesus or His apostles distinguish between believing in Jesus for eternal life (Hixson's fourth essential) and in believing in Him alone for eternal life (Hixson's fifth essential). The object of saving faith in John is always Jesus and His promise of eternal life to all who simply believe in Him (e.g., John 3:16-18; 4:10-14; 5:24; 6:35, 67; 11:25-27; 20:31).

<sup>45</sup> For example, leading into his five chapters on false gospels, he writes, "In the following chapters selected versions of the gospel in postmodern American evangelicalism will be examined and critiqued according to the five-fold standard set forth above" (p. 146, italics added; see also p. xxii). He examines the purpose gospel in light of this five-fold standard (pp. 195, 205). Likewise the performance gospel is rejected because according to Hixson it doesn't match the five-fold standard (pp. 306, 307, 309). The Prosperity Gospel doesn't match up to the core essentials either (p. 266).

By my count Hixson details what the five essentials are no less than thirty times.<sup>46</sup> I do not mean that he mentions the concept thirty times. No. In mantra-like fashion he lists what each of the five essentials are thirty different times.

Here is one of his thirty detailed statements of the five essentials: “These [are the] five core essentials of saving faith—viz. (1) Jesus Christ; (2) the Son of God who died and rose again; (3) to pay for one’s personal penalty for sin; (4) gives eternal life to all who trust Him and (5) Him alone for it” (p. 100).

One would think that these five essentials are at least a paraphrase of a key passage in the NT. Maybe Paul answered the Philippian jailer’s question with the five essentials. Or maybe the Lord Jesus gave the apostles the five essentials.

No. Amazingly, Hixson says there is no such passage! God evidently didn’t want to make it easy to find the object of saving faith! Hixson tells us that he got these five essentials<sup>47</sup> not from any individual passage, but from *a synthesis of various passages of Scripture*:

The establishment of these five core essentials of saving faith... *is a matter of theological synthesis. By linking Scripture*

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<sup>46</sup> See Hixson, pp. 84, 90, 92, 99, 100, 104 (2x), 110, 138, 145, 146, 205, 229, 237, 239, 242, 258, 261, 285, 302, 306, 314, 321-22, 332, 333 (2x), 337, 347, 369, 370.

<sup>47</sup> Actually, Hixson doesn’t specifically say who found these five essentials. He implies that he found them. However, Tom Stegall wrote about a similar five essentials in 2007. Yet Hixson doesn’t give Stegall credit for the idea. Maybe they both got their five essentials independently. Stegall says, “In my introductory article [Part 1, the eighth page] *I proposed five essential elements of the gospel*, which included Christ’s deity, humanity, death for our sins, resurrection, and salvation by grace through faith alone” (*Grace Family Journal*, Special Edition 2007, “The Tragedy of the Crossless Gospel (Pt. 4),” np, italics added). Surprisingly, Stegall’s five essentials are not quite the same as Hixson’s. Hixson has nothing about the humanity of Christ. Stegall has nothing about paying the penalty for one’s personal sins nor does he say that essential four is trusting in Christ for eternal life and that essential five is trusting in Christ alone for eternal life. In addition, Stegall was merely proposing these five essentials whereas by the time Hixson writes his five essentials are now the standard by which Christians should judge all gospels. Since Stegall endorsed Hixson’s book, evidently he agrees that Hixson’s five essentials are now our standard. The perceptive reader will see that this claim of five essentials is arbitrary dogmatism.

*with Scripture*, one can conclude that these five essentials comprise the kernel of salvific truth that must be believed if one is to receive eternal life (pp. 100-101, italics added).

A *synthesis* in the sense Hixson means it is a combining of various elements together into a unified whole. In other words, the object of saving faith is nowhere given in the Bible as a unified statement. The unbeliever, or the believer who wishes to evangelize clearly, must combine the various elements together. This is the ultimate search for the Holy Grail.

Here again we meet the arbitrary dogmatism of Hixson's position. Why should anyone accept his view *without rigorous proof* that it is correct?

Hixson says we reach this synthesis "by linking Scripture with Scripture." If so, which passages do we link? How do we know which passages give us one or more of the essentials? How do we know when we have found all of the passages and all of the essentials? Hixson does not provide a rationale for finding these special passages. Nor does he provide us with a list of which passages contain the essentials.

Why should such shallow argumentation be taken seriously?

#### D. HIXSON'S RATIONALE FOR HIS SYNTHESIS IS UNCLEAR

How Hixson found the passages that led to his five essentials is never stated. Yet clearly Hixson considers 1 Cor 15:1-11 as a crucial, or maybe *the crucial*, passage (pp. 148-49 n. 6). Of that text he states, "the repeated phrase 'according to the Scriptures' (vv. 3, 4) may well mark out *the core essence of the gospel*" (p. 149 n. 6, italics added).

This is a new expression. What is *the core essence of the gospel*? That sounds like it is the core minimum one must believe. But these two verses say nothing about the deity of Christ or about trusting Christ and Him alone for eternal life. For that matter, those "essentials" are not found anywhere in vv 1-11. Furthermore, the words "may well" signal uncertainty in Hixson's mind.

Amazingly, even within these two verses, Hixson says one need not believe *everything* to be born again. One need not believe in Jesus' burial (or His post-resurrection appearances according to Hixson (p. 149 n. 6). Those items "are mere supporting evidence of His death and resurrection" (p. 149 n. 6). How he divines which truths are essential and which are not is truly a mystery! Paul drew no such distinctions. This way of handling the text shows that *Hixson's* five essentials are *Hixson's* real standard, not the Scriptures themselves.

But one might wonder, using this same reasoning, why the death and resurrection of Christ aren't "supporting evidence" that Jesus indeed fulfills His promise of eternal life to all who simply believe in Him for it. In fact, doesn't the Gospel of John actually say that Jesus' death and resurrection is the eighth sign (compare John 2:18-22 with John 20:1-31, esp. v 30 "many *other* signs")? And wasn't the God-given purpose of the signs to lead people to believe in Jesus for eternal life as John 20:30-31 explicitly says?

Throughout the book Hixson cites other passages that evidently are part of his synthesis, including the sermons in Acts, Galatians, Romans, First Corinthians, and even occasionally the Gospel of John. However, Hixson is careful not to make the mistake that Hodges and I make of paying too much attention to the Gospel of John (p. 153 n. 19). All of these texts supposedly provide clues that help us find the Holy Grail of his core essentials.

But Hixson never says how many such passages there are, or how he can identify them when he finds them. Nor does he tell us how to extract the essentials from the non-essentials as he claims to do in 1 Cor 15:1-8. The whole concept is a logical and theological quagmire.

#### E. CAN WE ALL CONTRIBUTE TO THE SYNTHESIS?

Has Hixson closed the door on other people joining in the synthesis? Or can we all join in?

Hixson does not mention 2 Cor 5:21 as part of the synthesis. It says that Jesus "knew no sin" and that the Father made Him "to be sin for us." Lots of people have this verse in their gospel tracts. Might that verse be part of the synthesis?

If so, wouldn't this increase the number of essentials?

Besides, if someone fails to believe that Jesus "knew no sin," then he believes that Jesus is a sinner. And if someone believes that, then he does not have a Biblical view of the deity of Christ and hence he does not believe one of Hixson's essentials. I bet Hixson's new synthesis will pick up this verse and this essential.<sup>48</sup> Then we'll have six. But will we be sure even then that we have all of them?

The Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox communities would surely insist on bringing verses about the virgin birth into the synthesis.

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<sup>48</sup> If not, I can hear his critics now. He will be accused of preaching a sinful-savior gospel.

And, frankly, it is hard to see why we shouldn't bring them in. After all, if the deity of Christ is one of the essentials, and if Jesus couldn't be God unless He were born of a virgin, then wouldn't the virgin birth clearly be another essential?<sup>49</sup>

I'm getting a headache trying to figure out where to stop. I'm confident we could find many more passages for the synthesis if we put our minds to it. But then wouldn't Hixson's core standard become a false gospel? After all, people would evaluate *his gospel* in light of the new and improved core standard. Hixson's theology leads to an endless search towards a truly complete gospel. His stance is hopeless.

#### F. EXEGESIS TAKES A BACK SEAT TO TRADITION

Hixson's core essentials bring to mind a scene from *The Fiddler on the Roof* in which Tevye is singing about tradition. To an outside observer like me, it looks like Hixson is relying on some tradition to tell him what the essentials are. Then he searches the NT to find passages that talk about those essentials. While he would surely love to find one passage that lists all the essentials from his tradition, since he can't find such a passage, he makes do with a menagerie of texts which he says present the "core essentials." Hixson has found these five essentials hither and yon in the NT and then stitched them together into a salvific quilt. But there are lots of holes in the quilt!

Why didn't Paul answer the Philippian jailer's question (Acts 16:30-31) with the five essential truths?<sup>50</sup> Surely Hixson would have.

Why didn't the Lord Jesus clue His apostles in on what the five essentials would be? Hixson would have if he'd been there.

Why did John fail in the Fourth Gospel even to mention several of Hixson's five essentials, like Jesus paying for *one's personal sins* or the need to believe not merely in Jesus for eternal life, but to believe in Him *and Him alone* for eternal life?<sup>51</sup> If John was writing to tell unbelievers

<sup>49</sup> If Hixson doesn't add the virgin birth to his list of essentials, then people might call his view the natural-born-savior view.

<sup>50</sup> Paul appears to have given the pernicious false gospel: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household" (Acts 16:31). He only calls for faith in Jesus, not faith in His works! What is going on here? Maybe the dispensational change occurred after Acts 16 and Paul wasn't aware of it yet.

<sup>51</sup> It is true that Free Grace people often say that one must believe in Jesus alone for eternal life in order to have it. They do this in an effort to clear up

in this age how to be born again, surely he'd want to give them the list of the five essential truths. After all, Hixson gives the entire list thirty times in his book. Why wouldn't John give the list at least once?

That Hixson can't find his theology clearly taught in the Bible is frightening. Moses was a great prophet and man of God who spoke about Jesus (John 5:45-47). Hixson's theology is a mosaic, but it isn't Mosaic (i.e., divinely revealed)!

#### G. AN EXEGETICAL LEAP—FROM GALATIANS TO ACTS

A basic principle of Biblical exegesis is that one starts with the immediate context to determine the meaning of a term or expression. The next most important context to explore is that of the entire book in which the expression occurs. Only after exploring these two contexts should one go to other uses by the same author, then to other uses in the same testament, and finally to other uses in the entire Bible.

Yet when Hixson discusses the gospel of Gal 1:6-9, we find zero discussion of how Paul defined his gospel within Galatians (pp. 154-55, n. 19)! Instead he goes to Acts 13. This is a serious exegetical error.

Instead of studying Galatians to learn what Paul was teaching in Galatians, Hixson goes to a passage by a different author, Luke, to find out what Paul meant in Galatians! Hixson writes: "Scripture provides a record of the precise gospel that Paul preached to the Galatians during his first missionary journey. That record is contained in Acts 13. There one finds that the gospel Paul preached included quite naturally the death and resurrection of Christ (cf. Acts 13:28-30; [*sic*] 38-39)" (p. 155).

But how can Acts 13 be used to support Hixson's essentials? There is no mention in Acts 13 that Christ died *on the cross*, or that He died *for our sins*. We don't learn that Jesus rose *on the third day*, or that *He rose bodily*. We do not find that the object of faith is the Person *and work* of Christ. Instead it is Jesus Himself who is the object of faith (v 39). Nor is

possible confusion. Yet the Lord Jesus never once did that. The word *alone* is not in John 3:16; 5:24; 6:35, 47; 11:25-27 or any other text in John. A person who believes that faith in Christ must be supplemented by something else (obedience, commitment, perseverance, or even faith in other doctrines such as the deity of Christ, substitutionary atonement, etc.) obviously does not believe that all who believe in Jesus have eternal life. We need not add, as Hixson repeatedly does, the word *alone*.

the deity of Christ even mentioned. In fact, Jesus is called “this man”<sup>52</sup> by Paul (v 38). That none of this is discussed by Hixson is shocking.

Does this bother Hixson? No. Hixson says “not every gospel presentation in Acts explicitly lists all of the content for saving faith. Sometimes knowledge of one or more components of the object of saving faith on the part of the target audience is presumed” (p. 101). This is special pleading designed to cover the fragility of Hixson’s claims.

There is not a single sermon in Acts that lists all of Hixson’s five essentials. There is not a single passage anywhere in the Bible that does. Remember, Hixson admits this! He says his five essentials are *a synthesis* of many passages, not the product of just one passage (pp. 100-101). It is disingenuous of him to say that “not every gospel presentation in Acts explicitly lists all of the content for saving faith” when he knows that not a single one does. If any one passage did, he wouldn’t need a synthesis.

#### H. FAILURE TO EXEGETE ACTS 10:43

Hixson cites in support of his view Peter’s words to Cornelius and his household in Acts 10:43: “*whoever believes in Him will receive remission [i.e., forgiveness] of sins*” (p. 91, italics his). Yet Hixson does not explain how Peter’s words support his position! Actually Peter *contradicts* Hixson’s position. Peter is giving the dreaded false gospel that all who simply believe in Jesus Christ have eternal life! Why didn’t Peter say *whoever believes the five essentials will receive remission of sins*? Or better, why didn’t Peter say, *whoever believes that Jesus is God, that He died on the cross to pay his personal penalty for sin, that He rose bodily from the dead on the third day, and that all who trust Him and Him alone for eternal life will receive remission of sins*?

Eternal life is seemingly missing in this text. Why? According to Hixson, that is an essential truth. Hixson fails to mention (or notice?) that Cornelius knew in advance that Peter would be telling him “words by which you and your household will be saved” (Acts 11:14). Thus when Cornelius and his household heard that the one believing in Jesus receives the forgiveness of sins, they knew that the forgiveness came *with*

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<sup>52</sup> The NKJV has “this Man,” capital M. However, the Greek of the autographa would have been all capital letters and there would have been no way for the reader to distinguish between *man* and *Man*. In addition, when Paul spoke these words the listener wouldn’t either.

*the salvation*, with the eternal life. Thus they understood Peter to be saying that all who simply believe in Jesus have eternal salvation.

Hixson missed the bull's-eye. In fact, he missed the target completely.

#### I. INADEQUATE AND MISLEADING DISCUSSION OF 1 COR 15:1-8

Hixson says that in 1 Cor 15:1-8 there are nine truths, some of which are essential and some of which are not:

Paul lists nine things (underlined) that elaborate on the *good news* he had proclaimed to the Corinthians. It is self-evident when one compares Scripture with Scripture that Paul does not intend to include all nine of these facts as part of the precise content of saving faith, since nowhere are individuals exhorted, for example, to express faith in the fact that Jesus "was seen by Cephas" in order to be saved. Yet this eyewitness account (and others) is part of the *gospel* as articulated in 1 Corinthians 15 (p. 80, italics his).

Well, let's list the nine truths that Hixson underlined when he gave the text of the passage:

1. Christ died for our sins.
2. He was buried.
3. He rose again the third day.
4. He was seen by Cephas.
5. Then [He was seen] by the twelve.
6. He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once.
7. He was seen by James.
8. Then [He was seen] by all the apostles.
9. He was seen by me [Paul] also.<sup>53</sup>

Now compare that list to Hixson's five essentials:

1. Jesus Christ,
2. the Son of God who died and rose again,
3. to pay one's personal penalty for sin
4. gives eternal life to those who trust Him and
5. Him alone for it.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Hixson, p. 80.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

Hixson gives the impression that 1 Cor 15:1-8 contains his five essential truths *and adds in four optional truths*. At least, that's the impression I received. Yet items 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9 all deal with Jesus' burial and post-resurrection appearances, neither of which are part of the core standard according to Hixson! And when we examine the two truths left in vv 1-8—*according to Hixson's own reckoning!*—we find that only two of Hixson's five core essentials are included.

Obviously, Hixson's five essentials are his own artificial creation. Hixson is totally unable to defend them rationally.

## VII. CONCLUSION

While there is some valuable material in this book, it is drowned out by the flood of sloppy scholarship, shallow exegesis, and downright theological error. The FGA endorsers either didn't pay close attention to its contents, or they themselves are complicit in this misrepresentation of the Biblical gospel.

Free Grace Theology has been vilified for decades by Reformed Lordship theologians. Now it is being vilified by someone heading a supposedly Free Grace organization. If Hixson is joining with Lordship Salvation in railing against Free Grace Theology, maybe his theology is not really that different. Lordship theologians may stress commitment, obedience, and perseverance whereas he stresses *a long list of doctrines*. But he agrees with Lordship Salvation on this key point: believing in Jesus Christ for eternal life will not save anyone.

In Lordship teaching simple faith in Jesus must be supplemented by submission. For Hixson it must be supplemented by detailed theology. Beware of strange bedfellows.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> For those who'd like to share this article, we will send one copy of the Spring Journal at no extra charge for every one-year gift journal subscription at the special price of \$15 (includes S & H). Sign up one or more friends for the journal and they will get three issues for less than the price of two.

# **INTRODUCING JOHN’S GOSPEL: IN THE UPPER ROOM WITH JESUS THE CHRIST**

**Part 1 of 2**

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

John 13–17 contains a special body of material. In popular communication it is often called *The Upper Room Discourse*.

This is not precisely accurate. John 14:31 indicates the point at which Jesus and His disciples left the upper room. (Jesus says: “Arise, let us go from here.”) But John 15–16 continues the discourse, and the prayer of John 17 concludes it. Most writers now refer to John 13–17 as “The Last Discourse.”

The material in these chapters is unique to John’s Gospel. By contrast, the Synoptic Gospels are relatively brief in describing our Lord’s final interaction with his eleven disciples (cf. Matt in 26:17-30; Mark 14:17-26; Luke 22:14-38). For many reasons, we need to pay closer attention to The Last Discourse. We need to examine again its actual role in the Gospel of John.

## **II. A FUNDAMENTAL PREMISE**

A fundamental premise is that the purpose of the Gospel of John is evangelistic. This purpose is quite clearly stated in John 20:30-31. Nevertheless, I am well aware that the subject of John’s purpose is debated in the current technical literature.

During the 20th century Raymond E. Brown was probably the premier Johannine scholar in the English speaking world. He was a lifelong Roman Catholic, and an ordained priest, of moderately liberal persuasion. His magisterial two-volume commentary on John remains a goldmine for all students of the Fourth Gospel. He passed away suddenly on August 8, 1998.

The year before his death Brown published a massive volume (over 900 pages) entitled *An Introduction to the New Testament*. It distilled his enormous scholarly knowledge. In that volume he comments on the issue of John's purpose:

Luke explains his purpose at the beginning of his Gospel (1:1-4), but John saves his statement of intention till the end. In selecting material to be included in the Gospel his goal has been to have people come to faith or increase in faith (disputed reading) in Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God, and through this faith to possess eternal life in his name.<sup>1</sup>

This pretty well reflects the state of affairs even a decade later. Brown rightly locates the center of the discussion in the textual problem found in John 20:31. The problem concerns the presence or absence of a single letter (a sigma) in the phrase "that you might believe" (*hina pisteu[s]ate*). With it, the verb is aorist; without it, present.

Those who deny the evangelistic purpose of John's Gospel typically depend heavily on the present tense. They think that the present suggests the idea, "that you might *continue* to believe." The 27<sup>th</sup> edition of the Nestle-Aland GNT indicates that the present tense is found in three old manuscripts plus a few others; the rest support the aorist.

Actually it makes no difference at all which reading is accepted. The view that the present tense supports the idea of "continue to believe" is a semantic fallacy. This was pointed out as long ago as 1975 by Johannes P. Louw. Louw was the co-editor with Eugene Nida of the *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*.<sup>2</sup>

In 1975 Louw published an article, "Verbal Aspect in the First Letter of John," in the journal *Neotestamentica*. There Louw states:

The Greek praesens [present tense] is aspectually neutral or unmarked, it is a zero tense. It . . . may be used if the context suggests linear or habitual occurrence, and often verbs denoting processes . . . give the impression that the praesens

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), p. 360.

<sup>2</sup> Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains*, 2d ed., 2 vols. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988, 1989).

signifies duration though the praesens itself merely states the occurrence as a fact.<sup>3</sup>

On the next page he adds, "it is a zero tense of factual actuality."<sup>4</sup>

I know, of course, that this is not what was taught in Greek classrooms for the last several generations. Most scholars were weaned on the idea that the present tense expressed on-going, or continuous, action. But this idea is a grammatical fallacy. If you read your Greek NT with the same facility you do English, you can easily see for yourself that Louw's position is a slam dunk.

I am sorry to say this, but you can get a reputation as a Greek scholar without reading your Greek NT that easily. That's because the field of NT Greek is loaded to the max with helpful tools—with lexicons, grammars, word studies, commentaries, the whole nine yards. You don't need to know very much to use all these tools. The number of skilled semantacists like Louw is quite small. I once heard some lectures by his co-editor, Eugene Nida, reputed to be a linguistic genius. I suspect Louw is not too far behind.

Of course, not everyone has fallen into the "tense trap." You can find a competent, conservative defense of John's evangelistic purpose in Carson, Moo, and Morris's *An Introduction to the New Testament*.<sup>5</sup>

What's the bottom line? It is simply this. Neither in John 20:30-31, nor anywhere else in the Fourth Gospel as far as I can tell, does John employ the present tense of the verb *pisteuō* ("believe") with any suggestion of continuous action. The idea that John's purpose was to get people to "continue to believe" does not have a shred of linguistic evidence.

It is an idea based on a zero tense and it has zero probability.

### III. THE HISTORICAL PURPOSE OF THE LAST DISCOURSE

Before we can consider the literary purpose of The Last Discourse in John's Gospel, we must think about its historical purpose. Naturally, I assume the historicity and unity of the Discourse as presented in the

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<sup>3</sup> J. P. Louw, "Verbal Aspect in the First Letter of John," *Neotestamentica* 9 (1975): 102.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>5</sup> D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), pp. 168-72.

Fourth Gospel. It is not a pastiche of Jesus' sayings drawn from here and there.

In fact, the Discourse has a geographical starting point and a geographical endpoint. It begins in the upper room, but 14:31 shows that Jesus and His disciples left the upper room after 14:30 was spoken. The Discourse continued as they made their way through the streets of Jerusalem (John 15–16). The Discourse was concluded by Jesus' prayer in John 17. Following His prayer, John 18:1 states:

When Jesus had spoken these words, He went out with His disciples over the Brook Kidron, where there was a garden, which He and His disciples entered.

The words "He went out" (*exēlthe*) cannot mean that "He went out" of the upper room. They had left there some time ago. It can only mean that now Jesus and His disciples went out of Jerusalem itself, on their way to the Garden of Gethsemane. There is no real problem here.<sup>6</sup> As Craig Blomberg points out, "Peripatetic rabbis and philosophers regularly taught and discoursed with their followers as they walked."<sup>7</sup> There is no reason why John needs to say specifically that the group left after 14:31. I think that's obvious.

The Last Discourse, therefore, is a unity. In terms of the historical situation, its purpose is very clear. Let me say first what it is *not*. The Last Discourse is *not* an exposition of the Christian life. True, we can learn a great deal about the Christian life from this Discourse. But this benefit is *not* the reason for the Discourse.

Plainly, The Last Discourse was designed to prepare the disciples for the events that lay immediately ahead. In other words, it was designed to prepare them for Jesus' crucifixion, resurrection, and return to heaven. If

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<sup>6</sup> It is hard to see why Blomberg should say, "The last sentence in 14:31 creates the single biggest problem for supporters of the unity and authenticity of the discourse. Literally it reads, 'Rise, let us depart from here.' But Jesus keeps talking for another three chapters and seemingly does not leave the upper room until 18:1." But this is to misread 18:1 and fail to take 14:31 seriously. Craig L. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of John's Gospel: Issues and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), p. 204.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 205.

we pay attention to the text, this purpose has high visibility and it is inescapable.

Permit me to list here a series of statements by Jesus that disclose this purpose beyond doubt.

*John 13:18-19:* "I do not speak concerning all of you. I know whom I have chosen; but that the Scripture may be fulfilled, 'He who eats bread with Me has lifted up his heel against Me.' Now I tell you before it comes, that when it does come to pass, you may believe that I am He."

*John 13:33:* "Little children, I shall be with you a little while longer. You will seek Me; and as I said to the Jews, 'Where I am going, you cannot come,' so now I say to you."

*John 13:36:* Simon Peter said to Him, "Lord, where are you going?" Jesus answered him, "Where I am going you cannot follow Me now, but you shall follow Me afterwards."

*John 14:1-4:* "Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many mansions, if it were not so I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also."

*John 14:16 and 18-19:* "And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever . . . I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you. A little while longer and the world will see Me no more, but you will see Me. Because I live, you will live also."

*John 14:29:* "And now I have told you before it comes, that when it does come to pass, you may believe."

*John 15:20b-21:* "If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. If they kept My word, they will keep yours also. But all these things they will do to you for My name's sake, because they do not know Him who sent Me."

*John 16:1:* These things I have spoken to you that you should not be made to stumble."

*John 16:4:* "But these things I have told you, that when the time comes, you may remember that I told you of them. And these things I did not say to you from the beginning, because I was with you."

*John 16:16:* "A little while, and you will not see Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me, because I go to the Father."

*John 16:20:* “Most assuredly, I say to you that you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; and you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will be turned into joy.”

*John 16:28:* “I came forth from the Father and have come into the world. Again I leave the world and go to the Father.”

*John 16:32:* “Indeed the hour is coming, yes, has now come, that you will be scattered, each to his own, and will leave Me alone. And yet I am not alone, because the Father is with Me.”

*John 17:4-5:* [speaking to the Father] “I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do. And now, O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory I had with You before the world was.”

*John 17:11a:* “Now I am no longer in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to you.”

*John 17:13:* “But now I come to You, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have My joy fulfilled in themselves.”

I rest my case!

The historical purpose of The Last Discourse was this: *to prepare the disciples for the events that would begin that very night, and would lead to the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus the Christ.*

#### IV. THE AUDIENCE OF JOHN’S GOSPEL

Only if we clearly see the historical purpose of The Last Discourse are we prepared to see its literary purpose in the Fourth Gospel. In an inspired document, we expect a literary purpose that is fully consistent with the historical reality.

As we have just said, The Last Discourse is not an exposition of the Christian life. It is certainly useful for Christian living, but this was not its historical purpose. What then is its literary purpose within the framework of John’s Gospel?

In order to address the literary purpose of the Fourth Gospel, we should ask about its audience. Who were they?

Ancient tradition points in one direction only. According to Irenaeus (2d century AD), “John the disciple of the Lord who also had leaned upon his breast, published a Gospel during his stay at Ephesus.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.*, 3.1.

Eusebius, the 4<sup>th</sup> century church historian, reports the following: “Meanwhile the holy apostles of our Savior were scattered across the whole world. Thomas, according to tradition, was allotted Parthia, Andrew Scythia, and John Asia, where he stayed until his death at Ephesus.”<sup>9</sup> Later in his *History*, Eusebius quotes the statement of Irenaeus to which I have just referred.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the many debates about this evidence, there is no good reason for rejecting the tradition that John wrote his Gospel from Ephesus.<sup>11</sup> Both writers are likely to have known more than we do.

The internal evidence of the Gospel is consistent with the view that the fundamental audience was Jewish and living outside of Palestine. The audience was also Greek speaking and very literate.

During the days now long past when Rudolf Bultmann was the towering figure in NT scholarship, it was popular to describe John as a piece of Hellenistic literature that was only marginally Jewish as compared to the Synoptic Gospels. This view now deserves to be laughed at. The Qumran discoveries not only indicate the fundamental Jewishness of the

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<sup>9</sup> Eusebius, *H. E.*, 3.1. The quotation is from Paul Maier, *Eusebius: The Church History*, translation and commentary by Paul Maier (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007), p. 80.

<sup>10</sup> Eusebius, *H. E.*, 5.8.

<sup>11</sup> As is well known to technical scholars, the ancient evidence as a whole has been taken to suggest that there was more than one John in the early church. This is due to a passage from Papias, quoted by Eusebius (*H.E.*, 39.4), about which there has been much speculation as to whether he distinguishes a certain Elder John from John the Apostle and son of Zebedee. The classic conservative defense of authorship by John the son of Zebedee can be found in Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Gospel According to St. John* (1881; var. eds. and pubs.), pp. v-xxxiv. Quite recently Richard Bauckham (drawing upon the work of Martin Hengel) has argued that the Elder John was the author. He is to be identified with the beloved disciple of the Fourth Gospel, but distinguished from John the son of Zebedee. See Richard Bauckham, *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple: Narrative, History and Theology in the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), pp. 33-72. The argumentation is erudite (as always with Bauckham) but still severely taxes credulity.

Fourth Gospel. They also have led to the equally extreme suggestion that John is the most Jewish of all four gospels.<sup>12</sup>

But despite the obvious Jewish character of John's Gospel, John still translates certain Semitic words: i.e., *Rabbi* (1:38); *Messias* (1:41; 4:25), *Kēphas* (1:42), *Silōam* (9:7), and *Golgotha* (19:17). The audience could not be presumed to understand these Semitic words. Furthermore, the audience must necessarily have been quite literate. In Roman times you did not write a twenty-one chapter book for the man in the street. Perhaps I should say, for the man in the market place (that is, the agora). A long book of this nature presupposes a high educational level for its readers.

Keep in mind that Greek-speaking Jews (i.e., Hellenists) were a fruitful evangelistic field in NT times. The Hellenists referred to in Acts (Grk., *Ellēnistai*: 6:1; 9:29; 11:20) are best understood as Greek-speaking Jews. Their widows alone made up a significant portion of the Christian widows who needed the ministrations of the Church, according to Acts 6. As is often pointed out, the six deacons chosen to resolve the problem all had Greek names: *Phillipos*, *Prochoros*, *Nikanōr*, *Timōn*, *Parmenas*, *Nikolaos*.

After his conversion, Paul sought to evangelize the Hellenists of Jerusalem, who responded by trying to kill him (Acts 9:29). The Hellenists were also the object of evangelism in Antioch of Syria (Acts 11:20).

The Hellenists must have been ripe targets also in the city of Ephesus. There was a synagogue there where Paul evangelized (Acts 18:19), and for all we know there may have been several. In a commercial center like Ephesus we should expect a substantial Jewish population, and a significant number of successful Jewish entrepreneurs.

In NT times, Ephesus was a large and prosperous port city located on the western coast of Anatolia (i.e., Turkey). In the centuries that

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<sup>12</sup> Bauckham, *Beloved Disciple*, p. 136, notes ironically that, "It was the publication of the Qumran texts that effected a shift in Johannine scholarship toward recognizing the thoroughly Jewish character of Johannine theology. In retrospect this appears to have been a case of drawing the correct conclusion from the wrong evidence. There is no need to appeal to the Qumran texts in order to demonstrate the Jewishness of the Fourth Gospel's light/darkness imagery. This can be done more convincingly by comparison with other Jewish sources, which were already available long before the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls."

followed, the port silted up and the site of Roman Ephesus is now an inland site. It contained a huge outdoor theater, the one referred to in Acts 19, which could accommodate about 24,000 spectators. Years ago I actually sat down briefly in the ruins of this theater during a Bible lands tour conducted by my friend and Dallas Seminary colleague, Dr. Bruce Waltke.

Cornell and Matthews in their lavishly illustrated *Atlas of the Roman World* tell us this. "The life of Roman Ephesus is revealed, not only by the extensive archaeological remains, but by the inscriptions which show the munificence of the leading families and its rivalries with Smyrna for the title 'first city' of Asia."<sup>13</sup> You can still see today the ruins along a "colonnaded road at Ephesus, once lined with shops, leading from the harbor to the theater."<sup>14</sup>

Of special interest to us right now is the famous library of Celsus. Archaeologists have excavated the remains of this library that was dedicated in the early 2d century to the Roman governor of the province of Asia, by name, Tiberius Julius Celsus Polemaeanus (AD 106-107).<sup>15</sup> The construction of such a memorial to the governor, shortly after the close of the first Christian century, is eloquent. It is a powerful testimony to the high level of literary life in 1st century Roman Ephesus.

Thus when John published his Gospel at Ephesus, he could anticipate a significant readership. As Graham Shipley has stated in his very thorough volume, *The Greek World After Alexander: 323-30 BC*,

A helpful definition of literature might be the circulated written works of a social elite, read or performed for enjoyment. It is important, however, to define one's elite. In this book [Shipley's own] science, philosophy and literature are treated separately, but for many practical purposes they were parts of the same set of social activities carried out by the same individuals from the upper wealth-levels of society and their protégés

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<sup>13</sup> Tim Cornell and John Matthews, *Atlas of the Roman World* (New York: Checkmark Books, 1982; rep. ed. 2001), p. 152.

<sup>14</sup> David E. Aune, "Ephesus," in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. David Noel Freedman, Allen C. Myers and Astrid B. Beck (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 414.

<sup>15</sup> Cornell and Matthews, p. 152.

who devoted their leisure to their chosen mode of cultural creation.<sup>16</sup>

The original recipients of the Fourth Gospel could well have been an upper class Jewish social circle, or a guild composed of educated Jewish artisans or other professionals. Or the Fourth Gospel could have gone first to a large extended Jewish family many of whose members were educated readers. The possibilities are numerous. We just don't know which possibility is correct.

In any case, John intended to evangelize the original readers.

## V. THE LITERARY CHARACTER AND PURPOSE OF THE LAST DISCOURSE

As we just saw, Ephesus was a good place to publish a book because it apparently had many readers at the highest echelons of society. Strikingly, the first librarian of the famous library in Alexandria, Egypt, was an Ephesian. His name was Zenodotus (c. 325-c. 270 BC) who took that position about 284 BC. Those who are Greek students may be interested to know that Zenodotus invented the original Greek accents. They were tonal accents in his day.<sup>17</sup>

Therefore, I propose that a cultured, literate Jewish circle in Ephesus was the original intended audience of the Fourth Gospel. How, then, would The Last Discourse in John 13–17 strike these original, non-Christian readers? I may surprise you by my answer to that question.

My answer is this: It would remind some of them—perhaps most of them—of a famous dialogue of Plato called the *Phaedo*.

Plato, who lived from ca. 429–ca. 347 BC, left behind a large number of dialogues. A modern writer has said, “These dialogues were written twenty-three hundred years ago, and the thought of the ancient world, the Renaissance, and that of contemporary times, have all come under their influence.”<sup>18</sup> And although Socrates is a familiar figure in the

<sup>16</sup> Graham Shipley, *The Greek World After Alexander: 323-30 BC* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 236.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 240.

<sup>18</sup> Huntington Cairns, “Introduction,” in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato Including the Letters*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: University Press, 1961; 7<sup>th</sup> reprint ed., 1973), p. xiii.

Platonic dialogues, there are only three dialogues that purposely focus on the character and personality of Socrates, and these three are: the *Apology*, the *Crito*, and the *Phaedo*.<sup>19</sup>

The *Apology*, of course, records Socrates' defense before the Athenian jury that condemned him to death. The *Crito* reports the effort by Socrates' disciple, Crito, to persuade him to accept the aid of his disciples to escape his impending execution by poison. Socrates refuses. Interesting as these dialogues are, right now I am concerned with the *Phaedo*.

Needless to say, Plato's writings would be among the classics available at Ephesus. They would be of special interest there because Ephesus was situated in the Aegean basin in territory originally colonized by the ancient Greeks and known to them as Ionia. I do not know of any piece of ancient literature to which The Last Discourse bears a stronger resemblance than it does to the *Phaedo*.

The setting of the *Phaedo* is the last day of Socrates' life as he sits in his prison quarters awaiting the delivery of the poison from which he will die. There Socrates is surrounded by his disciples. The form of the *Phaedo*, as we have said, is a dialogue. His disciples participate by asking or answering questions. This in itself is reminiscent of The Last Discourse in John's Gospel.

The main content of the *Phaedo* consists of the words of Socrates himself. The topic under discussion between Socrates and his disciples, quite naturally, is the subject of the immortality of the human soul. Socrates himself believes in the soul's immortality but realizes he has only

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<sup>19</sup> See the observation of Edith Hamilton in her prefatory note to the *Apology*: "The first three dialogues given here [*Apology*, *Crito*, *Phaedo*] are an account of the last days and death of Socrates. In what order Plato wrote the dialogues we do not know, but in reading them there is good reason for beginning with those that center in the death of the chief personage. Only in them is Socrates himself the subject. In the others, although almost always the main speaker, he rarely speaks of himself. Indeed, in two of the three latest dialogues he is only a listener, and in the last he does not even appear. But in these first three he talks at length about his life and beliefs." In *The Collected Dialogues of Plato, Including the Letters*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 3.

logical arguments for it. In the final analysis he is not sure what comes after death.

The *Phaedo* is introduced by an exchange between a certain Eche- crates, probably a Pythagorean, and Phaedo, a disciple of Socrates. (I am using the translation of Hugh Tredennick as found in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato Including the Letters*, edited by the famous classicist Edith Hamilton and by Huntington Cairns.<sup>20</sup>) The *Phaedo* begins as follows:

**Echecrates:** Were you there with Socrates himself, Phaedo, when he was executed, or did you hear about it from somebody else?

**Phaedo:** No, I was there myself, Echecrates.

**Echecrates:** What then did the master say before he died, and how did he meet his end? I should very much like to know.<sup>21</sup>

Let me pause to point out that the words rendered “how did he meet his end?” in the Greek of Plato’s text were *kai pos eteleuta*.<sup>22</sup> They are not an inquiry about the method of execution, since Echecrates would have known that it was by poison. Instead this is a question that means, “How did he face death? How did he behave?” In antiquity that was an important consideration as I will point out in the second part of this article.

A little later we have this exchange:

**Echecrates:** But what about the actual circumstances of his death, Phaedo? What was said and done, and which of the master’s companions were with him? Or did the

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<sup>20</sup> *Phaedo*, translated by Hugh Tredennick, in *Collected Dialogues*, pp. 41-98.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>22</sup> *Plato’s Phaedo*, ed. with Introduction and Notes by John Burnet (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925), 57.6.

authorities refuse them admission, so that he passed away without a friend at his side?

**Phaedo:** Oh no, some of them were there—quite a number in fact

**Echecrates:** I wish you would be kind enough to give us a really detailed account—unless you are pressed for time.

**Phaedo:** No, not at all. I will try to describe it for you. Nothing gives me more pleasure than recalling the memory of Socrates, either by talking myself or by listening to someone else.

**Echecrates:** Well, Phaedo, you will find that your audience feels just the same about it. Now try to describe every detail as carefully as you can.<sup>23</sup>

In this way, the *Phaedo* begins. What, then, did Plato himself hope to accomplish through the account that Phaedo now unfolds in great detail? This becomes apparent towards the end of the dialogue, when the jailer comes in and speaks as follows to Socrates:

Socrates, he said, at any rate I shall not have to find fault with you, as I do with others, for getting angry with me and cursing when I tell them to drink the poison—carrying out government orders. I have come to know during this time that you are the noblest and the gentlest and the bravest of all men that have ever come here, and now especially I am sure that you are not angry with me, but with them, because you know who are responsible. So now—you know what I have come to say—good-by, and try to bear what must be as easily as you can. As he spoke, he burst into tears, and turning round, went away. Socrates looked up at him and said, Good-by to you, too. We will do as you say.<sup>24</sup>

Very touching, right? And what a cool customer Socrates is!

But just to make sure that the reader doesn't miss this point, here is how Plato ends the *Phaedo* with Phaedo's final words to Echecrates:

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<sup>23</sup> *Collected Dialogues*, pp. 41-42.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

Such, Echecrates, was the end of our comrade, who was, we may fairly say, of all those we knew in our time, the bravest and also the wisest and most upright man.<sup>25</sup>

The last words of this statement, which are the last words of the *Phaedo*, are a very euphonic series of superlative forms: *aristou kai allōs phronimōtatou kai dikaiotatou*.<sup>26</sup>

This is a nice rhetorical climax.

The literary genre of the *Phaedo*, therefore, is that of an encomium in dialogic form. That is to say, it is an extended tribute to a worthy man who died worthily.

So what about The Last Discourse? What is its literary purpose in John's Gospel? The answer is that the purpose is essentially the same as the purpose of the *Phaedo*, but with far weightier subject matter. No one ever faced death the way that Jesus did. And the way that He faced death is an argument that He is in fact the Christ.

Let's get precise here. Exactly what does John expect his readers to learn about Jesus in chapters 13–17? We are not left to guess. He tells us in John 13: 1:

Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that His hour had come that He should depart from this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end.

Two things appear here. (1) Jesus has perfect knowledge of what lies ahead and where He is going. (2) In His last hours He loves His followers right up to the end of His life. If you read chapters 13–17 carefully you will find that both these themes emerge repeatedly.

First of all, nothing catches Jesus by surprise. Early on He announces that one of His inner circle will betray Him (13:10-11, 21) and He gives Judas the sop (13:26-30). Judas leaves with only Jesus realizing what he is going to do. Moreover, Jesus knew that His separation by death from His disciples would be quite brief: "A little while and you shall not see Me, and again a little while, and you will see Me, because I go to the Father" (16:16). Note the repeated emphasis on this theme (13:33; 14:19;

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p. 98.

<sup>26</sup> Plato's *Phaedo*, 118.16-17.

and 16:19). As with the betrayal by Judas, the disciples don't pick up on this idea either (cf. 13:17-18).

Jesus knows. The disciples don't. Jesus has supernatural knowledge. As John will remind us in the Garden scene (18:4): "Jesus therefore, knowing all things that would come upon Him, went forth and said to them, 'Whom are you seeking?'"

The second major theme is Jesus' love for His own, right up to the end of His life. This is every bit as impressive as His supernatural foreknowledge. Here is a Man who knows full well He is about to be arrested, physically abused, tried, and condemned unfairly, and then subjected to a cruel and painful death by crucifixion. And yet in His Final Discourse with His followers—and even in His prayer to God—there is not the slightest trace of self-concern or self-pity. His whole concern is that His disciples should be able to weather this severe shock to their faith that would begin only too soon.

In John's Gospel, there is no discussion of Jesus' agony in Gethsemane. There is no report of His sweat falling to the ground like great drops of blood (Luke 22:44). That would have confused John's unconverted readers and distracted them from the point John was making. Jesus knew what lay ahead. And during this Discourse, He is totally focused on the need of His disciples in the coming hours and days, and even beyond that into their time of witness for Him. They could look forward to the arrival of another Helper when this present Helper returned to His Father (John 14:16-18). Jesus' words express His love and His concern for *them*, not for *Himself!*

As you know, The Last Discourse begins with that humble act of love that only John reports, the washing of His disciples' feet. Over and over in The Discourse Jesus speaks of His love for them and about their need to replicate that love among themselves. The Discourse closes with His request to the Father that "the love with which You have loved Me may be in them, and I in them" (17:26).

This unit of material shows a Person whose approach to His own death is unique beyond all human experience. Compared to this Person, Socrates himself was a poor, frail mortal who had no assurance about what lay beyond death for him. By contrast, Jesus the Christ knows He is on His way to the Eternal Father (John 13:1).

The bottom line is simply this: The Last Discourse in John 13–17 is a skilled portrait of Jesus in the hours before His death. This portrait invites the readers to believe that He is who this Gospel proclaims Him to be. Jesus is *the Christ*.

In other words, The Last Discourse is a brilliant and effective evangelistic tool.

# SHOULD PRETRIBULATIONISTS RECONSIDER THE RAPTURE IN MATTHEW 24:36–44?

Part 2 of 3

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The first article in this series proposed that Jesus answered in reverse order the two questions posed by the disciples on the Mount of Olives (Matt 24:3).<sup>1</sup> As recorded by the apostle Matthew, the two questions introduce a purposeful chiasmic structure that lends interpretive help to the discourse. The second question (“What will be the sign of Your coming and of the end of the age?” v 3b) is answered in vv 4–35.<sup>2</sup> In vv 4–28, the Lord surveyed the future seventieth seven (week) of Daniel, i.e., the seven-year tribulation period or the eschatological day of the Lord. This conclusion is drawn from the Lord’s statement that “all these things

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<sup>1</sup> Blomberg is correct in observing that there are only two questions, not three. However, he believes the Greek structure employs the Granville Sharp rule. Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, New American Commentary, vol. 22, ed. David S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 353 n. 37. Hagner also references the Granville Sharp rule. Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 33B (Dallas: Word, 1995), 688. But Wallace demonstrates a difference between what he calls the Granville Sharp construction (article + noun + *kai* + noun) and the Granville Sharp rule. The latter applies only when the nouns are personal, singular, and nonproper (Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the Greek New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996], 270–73). The construction in Matt 24:3 involves two impersonal nouns. Therefore the Granville Sharp rule does not apply. If the majority text is read, the Granville Sharp construction and rule are eliminated since its manuscripts contain two articles.

<sup>2</sup> Unless noted otherwise, Scripture will be taken from the NASB 1995.

(described in vv 4–7) are merely the beginning of birth pangs” (v 8). “Birth pangs” (*ōdin*) is a technical term drawn from the Old and New Testaments, designating a broad period of eschatological woes that is identified as the day of the Lord and precedes the Second Coming of Christ.

The phrase, “immediately [*eutheōs*] after the tribulation,” helps establish the eschatological emphasis of the 4–28 unit and eliminates any interval between v 28 and the Second Coming of Christ in vv 29–31. The design of the fig tree parable (vv 32–35) is to set forth in illustration the nearness of the Lord’s return to the signs of the tribulation. “In terms of the disciples’ question in 24:3, the ‘sign’ is the tree’s spring budding and blossoming, and Jesus’ coming is the summer bearing of fruit.”<sup>3</sup>

Verse 36 is introduced by *peri de*. This Greek phrase is widely recognized as beginning a shift in subject or perspective. Jesus now responds to the first question of the disciples, “When will these things happen?” (v 3a). As their twofold question implied, the disciples’ mention of “these things” (*tauta*) was linked in their thinking to the immediate events leading up to the “end of the age” (v 3). In other words, the disciples were asking Jesus how they could know when these end-of-the-age events begin, i.e., when the day of the Lord begins. Jesus’ reply was emphatic: the arrival of “that day” cannot be known (v 36). Paul, drawing on the previous teachings of the Lord in the Olivet Discourse, also taught that the day of the Lord would be a surprise event for the world (1 Thess 5:1–4). This exegesis of v 36 solves the insurmountable difficulty of harmonizing vv 36–44 with vv 29–31. While the Second Coming of Christ is preceded by numerous signs (vv 4–28) and follows a specific timetable of seven years, the day of the Lord and the pretribulational rapture that conjoins it are completely imminent.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> David L. Turner, *Matthew, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, ed. Robert W. Yarbrough and Robert H. Stein (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 585.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas calls this “dual imminence.” Robert L. Thomas, “Imminence in the NT, Especially Paul’s Thessalonian Epistles,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 13 (fall 2002): 192, 199, 208. He also uses the terms “joint imminence” and “double imminence.” Thomas, “The ‘Coming’ of Christ in Revelation 2–3,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 7 (fall 1996): 171, 179.

## II. THE DAYS OF NOAH (VV 37–39)

If these conclusions about v 36 are correct, then the days-of-Noah illustration refers to the unsuspecting lifestyles that exist prior to the sudden onslaught of the day of the Lord judgments. On the other hand, if vv 37–39 are to be placed chronologically at the end of the tribulation, an incongruity arises. An unusually casual attitude toward life exists at the precise time when the tribulation judgments are being poured out in all their intensity. How could a “business-as-usual” attitude prevail during the moments, days, months, or even years immediately preceding the Second Advent?

### A. THE DAYS BEFORE THE FLOOD CANNOT ILLUSTRATE THE DAYS BEFORE THE SECOND COMING

In the Noah parallel, the people “knew nothing” (v 39 NIV, NET; *ouk egnōsan*) about what was soon to happen until the flood came and took them all away.<sup>5</sup> If the flood judgment illustrates a judgment that takes place at the return of Christ “immediately after the tribulation of those days” (v 29), can it be said that the world will understand nothing of this coming destruction? At the sixth seal judgment, people of the world will hide in caves and rocks crying out to the rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?” (Rev 6:16–17). Doesn’t this reveal that the world will know that wrath has come and it will know precisely from where that wrath is coming—from God the Father and the Lamb! Hodges writes, “The flood came at a time when nothing out of the ordinary had taken place. But this

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<sup>5</sup> Walvoord feels that the Noah illustration is used in relation to the signs of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Instead of the ungodly “knowing nothing,” he suggests that they could know that the flood was not coming because observers could see that Noah had not finished the ark and loaded all the animals. When these were finished, then observers “could have sensed that the flood was drawing near, although they could not know the day or the hour.” John F. Walvoord, “Christ’s Olivet Discourse on the Time of the End: Part IV: How Near Is the Lord’s Return?” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 129 (January–March 1972): 38. This is general predictability with specific unpredictability. Concerning this interpretation of handling v 36, see the first article in this series, John F. Hart, “Should Pretribulationists Reconsider the Rapture in Matthew 24:36–44? Part 1,” *Journal of the Grace Theological Society* 20 (Spring 2008): 67.

would not be true of His coming if His coming occurs *at the conclusion* of the Great Tribulation. This obvious problem is often ignored.”<sup>6</sup>

The Noahic flood more likely corresponds to the time leading up to the sudden arrival of the day of the Lord and the seventieth seven (week) of Daniel.<sup>7</sup> In Heb 11:7, the author notes that Noah was “warned by God about things not yet seen.” Leon Morris writes concerning this divine admonition, “The warning concerned things ‘not yet seen,’ i.e., events of which there was no present indication, nothing that could be observed. At the time Noah received his message from God, there was no sign of the Flood and related events.”<sup>8</sup> But God’s patience ceased, suddenly the rains came down, and a massive destruction became increasingly obvious to the world. In parallel fashion, God is patient with mankind at the present time before the coming day of the Lord (2 Pet 3:9–10; cf. Rom 2:4–5). But when the day of the Lord arrives, God’s patience will cease, and worldwide destruction will begin without observable warnings (1 Thess 5:3). But the divine wrath of the day of the Lord will become increasingly obvious to the world, just as the above quote of Rev 6:16–17 implies.

Many commentators simply believe that the ordinary life patterns described in the Noahic illustration can coexist with the colossal distresses that run their course prior to Christ’s Second Coming. Normal pursuits will continue right up to Christ’s return.<sup>9</sup> Gundry strictly denies the possibility of a pretribulational rapture in vv 37–41 on the basis of the same

<sup>6</sup> Zane C. Hodges, *Jesus, God’s Prophet: His Teaching about the Coming Surprise* (Mesquite, TX: Kerugma, 2006), 24.

<sup>7</sup> “He [Christ] used the coming of the flood in Noah’s day and the destruction of Sodom in Lot’s day as examples of His imminent return (Luke 17:22–37).” Thomas, “Imminence in the NT,” 193.

<sup>8</sup> Leon Morris, “Hebrews,” *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 12:116.

<sup>9</sup> Henry Alford, *The Four Gospels, The Greek New Testament* (Boston: Lee and Shephard, 1878), 1:246; Blomberg, *Matthew*, 366; Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew, A Commentary: Volume 2: The Churchbook: Matthew 13–28* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 524; D. A. Carson, “Matthew,” *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 8:509; W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, 3 vols., International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1997), 3:381; Hagner, *Matthew 14–28* (Dallas: Word, 1995), 719–20.

reasoning. “But are we to think that people in the tribulation will stop eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage? The emphasis in the words of Jesus does not fall upon a normal condition of life, but upon the unexpected suddenness of His advent to those who will be engaged otherwise than in watching for Him.”<sup>10</sup>

But this understanding does not adequately explain the text. First, Gundry wants the nature of “that day” to be sudden and unexpected only for the ones who are not watchful (the unbelievers). But “that day” is sudden and unexpected for all since no one knows the time of its arrival (v 36). Knowing *that* the day of the Lord will come (believers) is not the same as knowing *when* the day of the Lord will come (no one knows except the Father). Second, the lifestyles depicted are those that have existed in every generation since the earliest days of human history (Noah). Contrary to Gundry, this implies an emphasis on the normalcy and indifference prior to the day of the Lord.<sup>11</sup> The illustration that follows vv 37–39 about two men working in the field and two women grinding at the mill (vv 41–42) also argues for the stress on normalcy in the passage.

Moo notes that the days of Noah are compared to the Parousia (*parousia*, v 37), not to the day of the Lord. Since the same word has been used for the posttribulation return of the Lord elsewhere in the Discourse (24:3, 27), should it not refer to that event in vv 37 and 39?<sup>12</sup> In response, a few factors must be kept in mind. First, when Jesus does

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<sup>10</sup> Robert H. Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973), 202.

<sup>11</sup> Bruner comments, “The crime indicated by Jesus in this verse is not *gross sin* (the people of Noah’s generation are not doing vicious things in Jesus’ description); it is *secular indifference*. The evil here is immersion in the everyday without thought for the Last Day” (italics original). Bruner, *Matthew: The Churchbook*, 524. Of course, Genesis records gross sin in Noah’s day, specifically that the earth was “filled with violence” (Gen 6:11, 13). Davies and Allison suggest that “eating and drinking” and “marrying and giving in marriage” may carry pejorative connotations. The former recalls the drunkenness following the flood (Gen 9:20–21) and the latter brings to mind the sin of the sons of God in Gen 6:4. Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 3:380, n. 46. Matthew 24:49 describes the evil slave as one who “begins to...eat and drink with drunkards.”

<sup>12</sup> Douglas J. Moo, “The Case for the Posttribulation Rapture Position,” in Gleason L. Archer et al., *Three Views on the Rapture: Pre-, Mid-, or Post-Tribulation?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 177.

describe His return in vv 29–31, He avoids the use of the Greek noun *parousia* (“coming, presence”). “The verb depicting the coming in 24:30 is *erchomenon*, but the noun designating the ‘coming’ in 24:37 is *parousia*, a term that easily covers a wider span.”<sup>13</sup> The Greek word *parousia* is capable of a more broad conception than just “arrival.” This appears to be confirmed by the parallel between Matt 24:37 and Luke 17:26. Bock states that Matt 24:37 “almost exactly matches” Luke 17:26.<sup>14</sup> The difference is that where Matthew has *parousia*, Luke has “the days [plural] of the Son of Man.”<sup>15</sup>

Generally, our English term “the First Coming of Christ” refers to the thirty plus years of Christ’s life, not just His conception or birth. So the thought of (the second) “coming” resident in the Greek word *parousia* carries the nuance of a span of time. The *parousia* of Christ involves His arrival in rapture, His subsequent hidden presence in the world while protecting Israel and carrying out the judgments of Rev 4–18, and His final manifestation (*tē epiphaneia tēs parousias autou*, “the manifestation of his coming,” 2 Thess 2:8 NRSV) after the Great Tribulation.<sup>16</sup> Even in the posttribulation scheme, the Parousia includes a rapture and a return of Christ separated by an interval of time. The interval is simply confined to a very small portion of the tribulation period (or posttribulation period).<sup>17</sup> Therefore, if Scripture warrants a longer interval (and it does) between the rapture and final manifestation of Christ,<sup>18</sup> objections cannot be sustained on the argument that the Parousia is a single, simplified event. Some single events are not simplified and cover more than a moment in time.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas, “Imminence in the NT,” 194 n. 8. See also Hodges, *Jesus, God’s Prophet*, 25.

<sup>14</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Moisés Silva (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 1432.

<sup>15</sup> Bock, however, views the “day” (singular) of the Son of Man (Luke 17:24, 30) and the “days” of the Son of Man (Luke 17:22, 26) as identical and the plural does not refer to a period of time. *Ibid.*, 2:1428.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Hodges, *Jesus, God’s Prophet*, 26–27, 62–63.

<sup>17</sup> Paul D. Feinberg, “The Case for the Pretribulation Rapture,” in *Three Views*, 81.

<sup>18</sup> Midtribulationists, like pretribulationists, understand the Parousia to involve a span of time; Gleason L. Archer, “Response to the Posttribulation Rapture Position,” in *Three Views*, 213–18.

Second, 1 Thess 5:4 and 2 Pet 3:10 explain that the day of the Lord comes as a thief. But Luke 12:39; Rev 3:3; and 16:15 state that Christ comes as a thief. The two events are simultaneous. If the day of the Lord and the rapture are pretribulational and coterminous, comparing the days of Noah to the day of the Lord or to the Parousia of Jesus is virtually synonymous. Since the days of Noah best describe a time before the future seven-year tribulation begins, then the days of Noah also best describe a pretribulational Parousia of Christ before the beginning of Daniel's seventieth seven.

The calamities that precede the Second Coming of Christ will be so severe that the human race will be close to extinction apart from the Lord's intervention (Matt 24:22).<sup>19</sup> The real question concerning the days of Noah is this: Would Jesus use such a description of casual lifestyles to communicate what the world would be like when "there will be a great tribulation, such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever shall" (Matt 24:21)? This seems most unlikely.

#### B. THE DAYS BEFORE THE FLOOD AND THE TEACHINGS OF PAUL AND PETER

*Pauline Teaching.* What is more appealing exegetically is the striking similarity of Christ's Noahic illustration and Paul's concept of the day of the Lord in 1 Thessalonians 5. The similarities of thought are convincing evidence that the source of Paul's teaching was the Olivet Discourse.<sup>20</sup> Kim first notes the strong parallels between Jesus' teachings and 1 Thess 5:2–7. In observing a series of phrases in 1 Thessalonians 4–5, he concludes, "So the formulas, 'in the word of the Lord' [1 Thess

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<sup>19</sup> J. F. Strombeck, *First the Rapture* (Moline, IL: Strombeck Agency, 1950), 69, comments, "There can be no complacency nor unexpected destruction after the most terrible destruction of all time has begun."

<sup>20</sup> G. Henry Waterman, "The Source of Paul's Teaching on the 2nd Coming of Christ in 1 and 2 Thessalonians," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 18 (spring 1975): 106–7. Thomas believes that the origin of all teaching about imminence in the NT can be found in Christ. Thomas, "Imminence in the NT," 192, 198. Hodges (*Jesus, God's Prophet*, 27–30) develops this perspective further, proposing that both Paul (1 Thess 4–5) and Peter (2 Pet 3) derived their teaching about the day of the Lord, the thief in the night, and the new revelation of the rapture from this passage in the Olivet Discourse. Blomberg (*Matthew*, 367) implies that John (Rev 3:3; 16:15) also picked up his use of the thief imagery from Jesus in Matthew 24.

4:15] and ‘you yourselves know accurately’ [1 Thess 5:2], which follow each other so closely in the wake of Paul’s reminder of his previous instructions ‘through the Lord Jesus’ (1 Thess 4:2), both indicate that in 1 Thess 4:15–5:7 Paul is alluding to the eschatological teachings of Jesus.”<sup>21</sup>

If this is the case, Paul and Jesus must be dealing with very similar eschatological concerns.<sup>22</sup> For Paul, the sudden arrival of the day of the Lord will be preceded by a time of “peace and safety” (1 Thess 5:1–3). Once the day of the Lord begins, unexpected destruction begins for the unbeliever. The believer, whether alert for the Lord’s return or not, will be delivered from that wrath by the rapture (1 Thess 5:9–10).<sup>23</sup> Pretribulationists appropriately recognize that Paul’s teaching of a peaceful and secure world that precedes the day of the Lord cannot easily be harmonized with John’s portrait of the end of the tribulation when the world will gather its armies in war against the coming Christ (Rev 16:13–16; 19:19). Paul’s “peace and safety” is an indicator both of when the day of the Lord will come as well as when the church saints will be delivered from that day by rapture. Both must be before or at the very inception of the tribulation. If the day of the Lord comes unexpectedly at a time of “peace and safety,” then the rapture also comes at a time of “peace and safety.”

This Pauline scenario—that the day of the Lord will come suddenly at a time of “peace and safety”—is quite comparable to the descriptions found in Matt 24:39 (“they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage”).<sup>24</sup> In the Lord’s illustration, the days of Noah were

<sup>21</sup> Seyoon Kim, “Jesus, Sayings of,” *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 477.

<sup>22</sup> This conclusion would go against Turner’s thought that “Jesus’ language does not approximate a distinction between a pretribulation rapture and a post-tribulation coming of Jesus to earth, as Paul arguably does (cf. 1 Thess. 4:13–18; 2 Thess. 1:6–10).” Turner, *Matthew*, 590.

<sup>23</sup> Zane C. Hodges, “1 Thessalonians 5:1–11 and the Rapture,” *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal* 6 (October–December 2000): 31–32.

<sup>24</sup> Waterman, “Source of Paul’s Teaching,” 110. To find a time in the tribulation for “peace and safety,” Jerome proposed a short break between the tribulation and the return of Christ (cited in Bruner, *Matthew 13–28*, 524). Gundry attempts to explain the “peace and safety” of 1 Thess 5:2 as the wish or expectation of men rather than the actual conditions; Gundry, *The Church and the*

primarily the days before (*pro*, v 38) the judgment of the flood when life continued as normal. During the tribulation, the very existence of all life will be in such jeopardy (Matt 24:22) that the tranquility of life described in Matt 24:37–39 could hardly take place. Therefore, the Noah illustration admirably portrays the universal, surprise arrival of the day of the Lord as taught by Paul.

*Petrine Teaching.* Peter's comments about the day of the Lord in 2 Peter are equivalent to that of Paul's. Peter links the flood to the eschatological judgment (2 Pet 2:4–9). Of interest is the phrase in 2 Pet 2:9 concerning God's rescue of the righteous from "tribulation" (*ek peirasmou rhyesthai*). This phrase suggests the rapture of Rev 3:10 where believers are kept "from the hour of trial" (*ek tēs hōras tou peirasmou*). In responding to some of Gundry's arguments that the flood illustrates the deliverance of church saints at the climax of the seventieth seven of Daniel (a posttribulationist interpretation), Edgar interprets 2 Pet 2:9 in its context.

The word Peter uses in v 9 is *peirasmou*, the same word which occurs in Rev 3:10...It is clear that "trial," *peirasmou*, does not mean everyday, routine trials. The trials described are the universal flood and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The flood was a judgment of God on the entire world. It was a physical judgment, not eternal judgment. This parallels the tribulation period and is described by the same term (*peirasmou*)...The statement that God knows to deliver from "trial," *peirasmou*, must mean from times of physical trial intended for the ungodly, a description which fits the tribulation period...Neither Noah nor Lot went through the trial as did the ungodly...Noah was in the ark before the flood started. He did not remain somehow to be protected miraculously through the flood. Both Noah and Lot were spared the "trial"...Gundry attempts to avoid the significance of this

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*Tribulation*, 92. According to Charles C. Ryrie, *Come Quickly, Lord Jesus: What You Need to Know about the Rapture* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1996), 115, Gundry's view is impossible since "the [1 Thess 5] passage contrasts peace and safety with destruction. Now if peace and safety means a wish in the midst of a time of war and danger, then any contrast with destruction that will follow disappears." Cf. the same response to Gundry by Thomas R. Edgar, "An Exegesis of Rapture Passages," in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, ed. Wesley R. Willis, John R. Master, and Charles C. Ryrie (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 207.

verse. He states that “Noah went through and emerged from the flood.” But Noah did not swim in the waters for a time and eventually emerge by being fished out. Noah was placed in a physical, geographical place of safety. This is not significantly different from the church being in the air with the Lord and possibly over the earth during the tribulation period.<sup>25</sup>

What Edgar is suggesting is that the deliverance of Noah and Lot illustrates the rapture of the church before the day of the Lord, not the deliverance of saints at the climax of the Great Tribulation. His eschatological interpretation of the deliverance of Noah and Lot in 2 Peter 2 is sound. After all, eschatology is a major theme in 2 Pet (cf. 1:16–21; 3:3–13). Additionally, Peter is quite aware of the teachings of Paul’s letters (2 Pet 3:15–16) and would therefore understand Paul’s teachings on the day of the Lord and the rapture. It is in the immediately preceding context of his remark about Paul’s epistles that Peter himself directly mentions the thief-like arrival of the day of the Lord (2 Pet 3:10).

In 2 Peter 3, the apostle again mentions the flood (v 6). False teachers will ridicule the Parousia of Christ and the promise of Christ’s return (2 Pet 3:3–4). Their mocking is based on the fact that life will proceed without any evidence of divine intervention (v 4)—similar to Paul’s teaching that peace and safety will precede the sudden destruction of the day of the Lord (1 Thess 5:3). But what the false teachers have purposefully neglected (*lanthanei gar autous touto thelontas*, lit., “for this escapes them [and they are] willing,” v 5) is the flood of Noah’s day (2 Pet 3:5–6). In Peter’s thinking, then, the judgment of the flood is thoroughly aligned with the time leading up to the imminent arrival of the day of the Lord (the seventieth seven of Daniel).<sup>26</sup> Can we not conclude from this that the imminent judgment of Noah’s day described in Matt 24:37–38 exceptionally parallels the imminent day of the Lord described by Paul and Peter in their epistles? If 2 Pet 2:9 and 1 Thess 5:9 declare a deliver-

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<sup>25</sup> Thomas R. Edgar, “Robert H. Gundry and Revelation 3:10,” *Grace Theological Journal* 3 (Spring 1982): 44–45. For the benefit of the English reader, Greek words in the quote have been transliterated.

<sup>26</sup> Though not writing from a pretribulation position, Bauckham’s comment is appropriate: “Since the Flood and the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah are prototypes of eschatological judgment, the situations of Noah and Lot are typical of the situation of Christians in the final days before the Parousia.” Richard J. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco: Word, 1983), 253.

ance from the day of the Lord by a pretribulational rapture for the church, and if Peter and Paul derived their teaching from the Lord in the Olivet Discourse, then in Matt 24:38 Noah's deliverance from the universal judgment of the flood best pictures the church's deliverance by rapture before the great eschatological "flood," the day of the Lord.<sup>27</sup>

### C. THE TYPOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF NOAH AND THE FLOOD

While pretribulational writers have sometimes attempted to support a pretribulational rapture with typological support, most pretribulational scholars today have avoided typological evidence for a pretribulational rapture.<sup>28</sup> Gundry comments, "But although the NT compares the Flood and the judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah to the destruction which will take place at Jesus' coming, nowhere do the deliverances of Noah and

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<sup>27</sup> In Luke 17:26–28, the parallel to Matthew 24:37, Noah and Lot appear side by side just as in 2 Pet 2:5–8. The juxtaposition of the flood (Noah) and Sodom (Lot) is occasionally found in Jewish literature (Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53*, 1431 n. 15). But it is more likely that Peter is borrowing from Jesus' teaching in the Olivet Discourse than from Jewish traditional sources. For example, Sirach 16:7–8 parallels the "ancient giants who revolted" with the "neighbors of Lot" (NRSV), but the passage does not mention Noah by name or Lot directly. The Testament of Naphtali 3:4–5 juxtapose Sodom and the Watchers who changed their nature (flood). But these references do not mention Lot or Noah by name, and Sodom is mentioned before the flood. The Wisdom of Solomon 10:4–7 mention neither Noah nor Lot by name, and interpose the Tower of Babel (10:5) between the two judgments. Third Maccabees 2:4–5 set side by side the flood and Sodom, but again do not mention Noah and Lot by name.

<sup>28</sup> Walvoord writes, "That the ark of Noah has typical significance can hardly be questioned." Walvoord, "Series in Christology, Part 4: The Incarnation of the Son of God," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 105 (October–December 1948): 415. He applied the typology both to the church and to believers in the tribulation. "The deliverance of Noah will have a large-scale repetition in the deliverance of the church before the time of tribulation which will overtake the world and also the preservation of some who believe in that tribulation time." *Ibid.*, 417. Cf. also Walvoord, "The Incarnation of the Son of God, II: Christological Typology," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 105 (July–September 1948): 295. Chafer applied the type of Noah and the ark in a similar fashion. "In particular it foreshadows the future preservation of the saints in the period of great tribulation before the Second Coming of Christ. It may also be applied to the true church which will be caught up to be with Christ before this final period begins and will return to the earth after the judgment is completed." Lewis Sperry Chafer, "The Saving Work of the Triune God," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 105 (July 1948): 295.

Lot stand for the rapture.”<sup>29</sup> Most pretribulationists concur with this assessment. But in contradistinction to Gundry’s viewpoint, evidence can be gleaned for Noah’s deliverance from the flood as a type of the deliverance of the church at the rapture.<sup>30</sup>

Several OT passages imply the beginning stages in the development of the flood as a prophetic type of the end of the world in apocalyptic literature.<sup>31</sup> Isa 54:9 speaks of the days of Noah in comparison to another day in which God will unleash His “flood of anger” (v 8 NJB).<sup>32</sup> The verse probably speaks of the Great Tribulation.<sup>33</sup> In Isa 24:14–18, the phrase “the windows above are opened” (LXX, *thyrides ek tou ouranou*, “windows of heaven”) may also contribute to an OT typology concerning the flood of Genesis (cf. the Hebrew of Gen. 7:11; “the windows of heaven,” NKJV). This Isaiah passage falls within the Little Apocalypse of Isa (24:1–27:13) and relates to the tribulation judgments,<sup>34</sup> the seventieth seven of Daniel, and the day of the Lord.<sup>35</sup> The reference in Dan 9:26 to the end of the city and the sanctuary that comes as a flood (*kataklysmos*, LXX, Theodotion) may have a part in this theme.<sup>36</sup> If the flood typifies the day of the Lord, then the deliverance of Noah at the flood appears to portray the deliverance of the godly before the day of the Lord, not from within the day of the Lord.

<sup>29</sup> Gundry, *The Church and the Tribulation*, 61.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. the above quote by Edgar on 2 Pet 2:9.

<sup>31</sup> Jack P. Lewis, *A Study of the Interpretation of Noah and the Flood in Jewish and Christian Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1968), 9.

<sup>32</sup> For a discussion of why the Hebrew word *sešep* (a hapax legomenon with an uncertain meaning) in Isaiah 54:8 is translated “flood,” see Michael A. Grisanti, “*sešep*,” *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, Willem A. VanGemeren, gen. ed., 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 5:227–28.

<sup>33</sup> Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (Chicago: Moody, 1959), 461.

<sup>34</sup> Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *The Footsteps of the Messiah: A Study of the Sequence of Prophetic Events* (San Antonio: Ariel Press, 1982), 126–27.

<sup>35</sup> J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study of Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1964), 195.

<sup>36</sup> John F. Walvoord, *Daniel* (Chicago: Moody, 1971), 231, entertains the possibility that the closing remarks of Daniel 9:26, with its double reference to the “end,” may refer to the future destruction of Jerusalem at the end of the age (though he decides against it).

Psalm 29:10 may also depict the flood as an eschatological event. It uses the Hebrew word *mabbul* (“flood”), which is found elsewhere only in the flood narrative of Gen (6:17; 7:6–7, 10, 17; 9:11, 15, 28; 10:1, 32; 11:10). Psalm 29 is a Divine Warrior victory song along the lines of the royal or kingship psalms of Psalm 96–98.<sup>37</sup> The psalm contains strong similarities to Exodus 15.<sup>38</sup> Exodus 15, the Song of Moses, is cited prophetically in Rev 15:3 in relation to the epitome of holy wars, the Second Coming of Christ. Psalm 29 also contains aspects of apocalyptic literature, including theophanic imagery and “mountain” symbolism.<sup>39</sup> The unusual sevenfold repetition of the phrase “the voice of the LORD” (*qôl yhw̄h*; Ps 29:3–5, 7–9) leading up to v 10 brings to mind the voice of Yahweh at the day of the Lord (Joel 2:11; 3:14–16).<sup>40</sup> According to Görg, Ps 29:10 communicates the idea that the Lord takes His seat on His throne at a particular point in time, and subsequently exercises permanent sovereignty.<sup>41</sup> In other words, Ps 29:10 may not address the universal reign of the Lord or exclusively the victory of Yahweh over the forces of nature or Baal. Instead it may address the Lord’s victory over

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<sup>37</sup> Tremper Longman, III, “Psalm 98: A Divine Warrior Victory Song,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 27 (September 1984): 274. Historically, the Divine Warrior victory songs celebrate “the return of Yahweh the commander of the heavenly hosts who is leading the Israelite army back home after waging victorious holy war.” *Ibid.*, 268.

<sup>38</sup> Willem A. VanGemeren, “Psalms,” *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 5:253. Longman classifies Exodus 15 as one of the Divine Warrior victory songs found outside the psalter. Longman, “Divine Warrior Victory Song,” 274. Elsewhere he states, “[I]t is true that Yahweh’s kingship is frequently associated with his warring activity [a footnote cites Ex. 15]. Thus the reaffirmation of Yahweh’s kingship follows the successful waging of holy war.” *Ibid.*, 271.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. J. Daryl Charles. “The Angels, Sonship, and Birthright in the Letter to the Hebrews,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 33 (June 1990): 173 n. 12.

<sup>40</sup> Craigie suggests (with skepticism) a similar idea. “There are no explicit references to Ps 29 in the NT, though it has been suggested that the ‘seven thunders’ of Rev 10:3 have Ps 29 as their background; such a view is far from certain.” Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 19 (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), 250.

<sup>41</sup> M. Görg, “*yāsab*,” *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 15 vols., ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, trans. David E. Green. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 6:437.

world chaos at the Second Coming when Christ takes His seat on the Davidic throne (Matt 25:31).<sup>42</sup>

This prophetic typology is developed in the NT where the flood is the supreme figure of the final eschatological judgment.<sup>43</sup> In the Noahic analogy of the Olivet Discourse, the Greek formula *hōsper* (“just as”) . . . *houtōs* (“so also”) (Matt 24:37, 38–39)<sup>44</sup> may be intended to disclose a type-antitype (Noah-Christ) relationship such as is found in Matt 12:40 (Jonah-Christ) and Rom 5:12, 19 (Adam-Christ).

But the question remains as to what Noah and the flood typify more explicitly. Do they typify the judgment of the ungodly at the Second Coming of Christ and the rescue of elect Jews? Or do they represent the deliverance of the church at the rapture and the sudden destruction for the unbeliever brought about by the arrival of the day of the Lord? An answer may be found in the inspired typology of 1 Pet 3:20.

It has already been proposed that the Lord’s words in the Olivet Discourse have given rise to the 1 and 2 Peter references to Noah. The exact phrase, “days of Noah” found in Matt 24:37 (par. Luke 17:26), also appears in 1 Pet 3:20. In the following verse (3:21), the word *antitypos* (“corresponding to, antitype”) appears and establishes an unquestionable typological view of the flood.

The NIV supplies the word “water” in its translation of 1 Pet 3:21, “this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you.” The NASB is more in keeping with the vagueness of the Greek, “Corresponding to that [*ho*], baptism now saves you.” The interpretive question is: To what does the relative pronoun *ho* refer? Nearly all commentators are persuaded that “water” (*hydatos*) in the previous verse is the antecedent. However, the

<sup>42</sup> Cf. the beasts of Daniel 7 and the seven-headed beast of Revelation 13 that come up from the sea.

<sup>43</sup> William Joseph Dalton, *Christ’s Proclamation to the Spirits* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1965), 112–13; cf. 175, 206–7. Dalton says that Jewish rabbinical writings also view the flood as the divine judgment *par excellence*; *ibid.*, 112. Lewis also sees Matthew 24:37 as a flood typology. Lewis, *Noah and the Flood in Jewish and Christian Literature*, 113, 115.

<sup>44</sup> The majority text has *hōsper* . . . *houtōs* twice. The Nestle-Aland text, 27th ed., has *hōsper* . . . *houtōs* in v 37, but *hōs* . . . *houtōs* in vv 38–39. Matthew’s Gospel favors both *hōsper* and *hōs*. Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982, 1994), 492–93.

water did not save Noah and his family but was instead an instrument of divine judgment. The ark saved Noah. Heb 11:7 is clear on the matter: “By faith Noah...prepared an ark for the salvation of his household.” The relative pronoun in 1 Pet 3:21 makes reference to the word “ark” (*ki-bōtou*) in the previous verse, not to “water” (*hydatos*). If the type is the ark<sup>45</sup> and not the water of the flood, neither is the antitype (*antitypos*) water baptism. In context, the antitype is better taken as Spirit baptism, which places believers into the invisible church, the body of Christ. In other words, for Peter, Noah’s entrance into the ark is a type of believers entering the invisible church by means of Spirit baptism.<sup>46</sup>

A thorough exegesis of 1 Pet 3:21 is impossible here. But a few brief comments will help establish the potential validity of Spirit baptism as the intended meaning of “baptism” in 1 Pet 3:21.

(1) In 1 Pet 3:16, Peter leads into the 3:18–21 context by using Paul’s technical term *en christō* (“in Christ”), which takes place only through Spirit baptism. Outside of Paul’s seventy-three uses of the term, it is found only in 1 Pet (3:16; 5:10, 14).

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<sup>45</sup> “Such ‘typological’ shaping of the Flood narrative by the author of the Pentateuch is remarkably similar to the later reading of this passage in 1 Pet 3:21. In that passage the ark is seen to prefigure the saving work of Christ as it is pictured in NT baptism.” John H. Sailhamer, “Genesis,” *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 2:85. Sailhamer does not clarify the kind of baptism to which he is referring. Nevertheless, his comment (that the ark is typological) is appropriate.

<sup>46</sup> Typological interpretation of Noah and the ark was developed to an unbiblical extreme in the third century and later. The ark and all its details, even its measurements, were allegorized. For example, Augustine maintained that there was no salvation for those outside the Roman church because there was no salvation outside the ark. For further details of later church fathers and their typological treatment of the flood, see Lewis, *Noah and the Flood in Jewish and Christian Literature*, 156–80.

According to Hippolytus, Callistus, a pastor of a church in Rome (ca. A.D. 220), was the first person to claim he could forgive people’s sins on behalf of God. Hippolytus said that this claim was based on the fact that the church was typified by the ark of Noah in which were both clean and unclean animals. Therefore, Callistus reasoned that anyone in the church guilty of sin should be permitted to remain within the church. Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies*, IX, 7. Such unbiblical extremes are not a substantial reason for rejecting Peter’s typology: the ark is a type of the invisible church that is entered by Spirit baptism.

(2) All commentators recognize that 1 Pet 4:1–6 (the immediately following context to 1 Pet 3:20) parallels Romans 6—a passage that outlines the ministry of Spirit baptism. (The baptism of Romans 6 is unlikely water baptism since water is never mentioned in Romans 6.)

(3) An emphasis is clearly placed on “spirit/Spirit” (1 Pet 3:18–, 19) in the context.

(4) At v 21, the New American Standard Bible uses the phrase, “an appeal to God for a good conscience.” However, *eperōtēma* (“appeal”) is better translated as “response” (NIV Notes) or “answer” (KJV, NKJV, Amp.). By our Spirit baptism into Christ’s death and resurrection, believers have been made “alive to God” (Rom 6:11) and can respond or answer to Him from a clear conscience (“as alive from the dead,” Rom 6:13).<sup>47</sup>

(5) Evangelical commentators who do not hold to baptismal regeneration are ultimately forced to deny Peter’s claim that “[water] baptism now saves you.” This is unnecessary if Spirit baptism is in view. In this dispensation, no one can have the gift of eternal life if he or she does not also have the baptism of the Spirit (1 Cor 12:13). Since the apostle Paul declared that the church is delivered by rapture before the tribulation wrath (1 Thess 5:9–10; cf. Rev 3:10), and in Peter’s typology the ark represents the church (i.e., everyone who is joined to Christ by Spirit baptism.); then the deliverance of Noah and his family in the ark logi-

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<sup>47</sup> Congdon offers similar points: “For this reason it would appear that the ‘baptism’ is the baptism of the Spirit into the body of Christ. Other reasons for believing this to be Spirit baptism are: (1) it ‘saves,’ which water baptism could not do; (2) it is able to give a person a good conscience, which no outward ordinance could...; (3) it is ‘baptism...by the resurrection of Jesus Christ’—therefore, the same truth as found in Roman 6:4, 5....If this is true, then the baptism of the Spirit is closely associated with the work of remaking and taking away the stain of the unregenerate conscience. This would remove even farther the possibility that water baptism is in view here.” Roger Douglass Congdon, “The Doctrine of Conscience,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 102 (October–December 1945): 481. Bennetch remarks, “[Noah was] one whose testimony to ‘the world of the ungodly’ took the tangible form of an ark or boat able to save from a flood judgment, comparable now to the Spirit’s baptism into Christ for salvation.” John Henry Bennetch, “Exegetical Studies in 1 Peter: Part 15,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 101 (April–June 1944): 194. Chafer favored this view. Lewis Sperry Chafer, “The Baptism of the Holy Spirit,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 109 (July–September 1952): 215.

cally typify the pretribulational rapture of the church and deliverance from the coming day of the Lord.<sup>48</sup> Even if this interpretation of 1 Pet 3:20–21 is rejected, pretribulationists must accept the fact that in this passage Noah and the flood biblically typify something relevant for first-century readers as members of the NT church, not something relevant for Israel in the Tribulation.

Perhaps the typology may be extended.<sup>49</sup> In the “days of Noah,” before the flood (Matt 24:37; Luke 17:26–27), God was waiting patiently (“the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah,” 1 Pet 3:20). In Thiessen’s opinion, Gen 6:3 (“My Spirit will not contend with man forever...his days will be a hundred and twenty years”) describes the work of the Spirit restraining wickedness and seeking repentance during the days of Noah. This fittingly parallels the ministry of the Holy Spirit as the “Restrainer” during the church age as taught by Paul in 2 Thess 2:6–8. Once the Holy Spirit is removed through the pretribulational rapture of the church, then the day of the Lord comes and the lawless one (the Antichrist or Beast) is revealed.<sup>50</sup>

We might further observe (but tentatively) from the analogy that Noah and his family were not rescued out of the floodwaters after they had begun—a rescue that would more closely match a midtribulational or posttribulational rapture. Not a drop of rain touched them. In fact, Gen 7:4, 10 record that Noah and his family entered the ark seven days before the rains fell on the earth.<sup>51</sup> Kidner notices the correspondence between

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<sup>48</sup> When Peter says that Spirit baptism “now saves you” (1 Pet 3:21), other meanings for *sōzō* (“save”) besides justification-salvation are possible. However, Peter does not seem to have in mind Paul’s salvation from wrath by rapture (1 Thess 5:9–10) unless it is by indirect reference.

<sup>49</sup> For typological implications of Noah and the flood not included in this article, see Walvoord, “Series in Christology, Part 4,” 415–17.

<sup>50</sup> Henry Clarence Thiessen, “Will the Church Pass through the Tribulation? Part 3,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 92 (July 1935): 305. However, elsewhere Thiessen held that Noah might be a type of the remnant of Israel rescued from the tribulation, and Lot in his removal to Zoar may be a type of the church (Luke 17:26–32). *Ibid.*, 295. That the “restrainer” of 2 Thess 2 refers to the ministry of the Spirit through the church as believers preach the gospel, see Charles E. Powell, “The Identity of the ‘Restrainer’ in 2 Thessalonians 2:6–7,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154 (July 1997): 331.

<sup>51</sup> Some debate exists over when Noah entered the ark. A few commentators who that understand the text to mean that Noah entered the ark and remained

the seven days in the ark and the seventieth seven of Daniel. Although not speaking for a particular millennial position, he writes, "In the vision of the end (Dan 9:27) the symbol of a final seven days or years, and of its shortening, may be intended to call to mind this closing of a day of grace."<sup>52</sup> Perhaps the reverse symbolism is also possible. The special seven days in the ark are designed by God to prophesy typologically the relationship of the church to the devastating judgments of Daniel's seventieth seven.<sup>53</sup>

All of these evidences concerning the scriptural account of the flood lead to the conclusion that the days of Noah prophesy typologically the prevailing attitude that exists prior to the eschatological judgments of the day of the Lord and the pretribulation rapture of the church.

### III. CONCLUSION

A serious dilemma exists if Matt 24:36 has reference to the Second Coming of vv 29–31. But through a careful notice of the *peri de* construction that introduces v 36, the exegete may perceive the beginning of a slightly new subject matter—that of the imminent coming of the day of the Lord and the pretribulation rapture of the church. The terms "that day" and "(that) hour" have reference to the coming day of the Lord, not the posttribulation return of Christ mentioned in 24:29–31. Verse 36,

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there for seven days before the rains began include John A. McLean, "Another Look at Rosenthal's 'Pre-Wrath Rapture,'" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 148 (October 1991): 394; Allan P. Ross, "Genesis," in *Bible Knowledge Commentary, Old Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1985), 39; John H. Walton, *Genesis*, NIV Application Commentary, ed. Terry Muck (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1002), 314 n. 15. Lewis implies that this was the view of rabbinic Judaism. Lewis, *Noah and the Flood in Jewish and Christian Literature*, 141.

<sup>52</sup> Derek Kidner, *Genesis*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, ed. D. J. Wiseman (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1967), 90.

<sup>53</sup> It may be objected that the rain (judgment) did not come until after the seven days, but the judgments of the day of the Lord take place during the seven-year tribulation. This fact and others do not align with the typology being proposed. But it must be remembered that all or most of the details of a type (a historical event or person) do not need to correspond to the antitype. Paul shows us numerous ways that Adam does not parallel Christ (Rom. 5:15–17). Nevertheless, he calls Adam a type of Christ (Rom. 5:14, 18).

therefore, concerns the unpredictability and imminence of that eschatological event.

Jesus' Noahic illustration also pictures the coming judgments of the day of the Lord. Life before the flood as a portrait of the future parallels Paul's concept of the world attitude that prevails prior to the thief-like advent of the day of the Lord (1 Thess 5:1–3). Additionally, as early as the OT and confirmed in the New, the flood has become prophetically typological of the coming eschatological judgments, i.e., the tribulation or seventieth seven of Daniel. To be more specific, 1 Pet 3:20–21 lends support that Noah's ark prefigures the church. But like Noah and his family, believers in the church will be delivered from the day of the Lord (2 Pet 2:9) by the pretribulation rapture. Nothing about Noah (or Lot) in 1 or 2 Peter potentially symbolizes the rescue of the Jews (and/or Gentiles) at the close of the tribulation period. As the flood swept away the unsuspecting pagans of the flood era, so the unbeliever will be swept away in the unsuspecting judgment of the tribulation wrath.

In the third study on Matt 24:36–44, a closer investigation will be made of the word for “took...away” (*airō*) in v 39 and the word for “will be taken” in vv 40–41 (*paralambanō*). An examination of *aphiēmi* (“will be left”), the contrasting word to *paralambanō*, will also be examined. The major question is this: What is the natural sense of these Greek words and how does this contribute to the pretribulation rapture in the passage? It will be necessary also to examine the nature of the thief imagery in the Discourse and in other NT literature, and its bearing on the passage. Consideration will be given to the command to “watch” (*grēgoreō*) for the Lord's Parousia as it is presented in the NT. The series will conclude with brief answers to a few key objections proposed by pretribulationists against finding the rapture in Matt 24:36–44.

# **LIFTING HOLY HANDS? COMPARING CONTEMPORARY PRACTICE WITH BIBLICAL INJUNCTIONS AND DESCRIPTIONS**

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Coming back to a Baptist seminary after being gone for 20 years enabled me to identify many changes, like an uncle who sees his niece at birth and not again until her High School graduation. One of these “my how you’ve grown” moments occurred when I attended my first worship service in the Seminary Chapel.

Remembering my student days, I was expecting traditional sacred organ music with a new chorus or two thrown in to appear contemporary; the drum set, electric guitar and tambourine were unexpected changes. People were clapping to the music and lifting hands up toward heaven. Even a professor who teaches Baptist worship was lifting his hands, though not an unrestrained outstretched raising of his arms, rather a discreet waist level opening of the palms in an upward direction. Sitting in this transformed worship service I rejoiced at the expression of joy and thought, “My how you’ve changed!”

This injection of emotion and freedom to express praise to God in various forms is not unique to seminaries. Many evangelical churches enjoy this new freedom in worship even as other churches, unsure of change, stick to more reserved forms of worship. While all these changes will be tested over time, I’d like to focus on one specific action. Just as a lifted hand asks to be recognized in a classroom, the practice of lifting hands in worship needs to be addressed.

Some people are uncomfortable with hands being lifted during worship services because it is new. Others are irritated, not just uncomfort-

able. They see it as a move towards a worship tradition that they believe might be theologically incorrect. Or worse, they see lifting hands in a worship service as a move towards rowdy behavior. “What’s next,” they might think, “One of those NFL stadium *waves*?” However, those lifted hands are not trying to offend, they are just expressing themselves. Some even justify “lifting hands” by quoting scripture and saying that Christians are commanded to worship in this way.

Should we *all* be lifting our hands in praise like we bow our heads in prayer? Should we ask people to *not* lift their hands because it is disturbing to others, or ask them *to* lift their hands because it is a command? Is this action of lifting hands during a worship service a personal preference, or a command? Is it a nuance of worship to be encouraged or a nuisance to be confronted, or should it be simply tolerated?

In this article, I will briefly examine what Scripture teaches regarding the use of lifting hands in worship. The observations are broad in their scope and need further and deeper exegetical work. Culture and tradition speak about this as well, but for the present let us confine ourselves to an introductory Biblical theology. This article can serve as a foundation for further study.

## II. FIRST TIMOTHY 2:8

*Therefore, I want the men in every place to pray,  
lifting holy hands, with out wrath and dissension.<sup>1</sup>*

Paul expresses his desire that men in every place should pray, lifting up holy hands. How strongly does Paul desire that men pray? He does not use the same force of a command seen in the earlier exhortation to prayer in 2:1. There, he uses a different and stronger word, which is “exhort” (*parakaleō*). Here, he chooses “I want” (*boulomai*) as he does later in the book when he desires the younger women to get married (5:14). It, *boulomai*, has the same suggestive feel rather than a clear command. Thus, Paul’s preference is that when people pray they lift their hands, just as he is only suggesting that younger women get married. The NIV translation is unfortunate for it gives the impression that the wish is for

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotes from New American Standard Bible unless otherwise noted.

men to lift holy hands. However, the structure is a subjunctive, *I wish*, followed by an infinitive, *to pray*; and the *lifting of hands* is a participle modifying the call to pray. The NASB translation best fits the grammar.

So then, what exactly is Paul suggesting? The lifting of hands (*epaironatas*) is used in conjunction with praying. It can be translated as an action that is associated with, but independent of, praying; much like the participles in the Great Commission.<sup>2</sup> Thus, it could be that Paul has two independent actions in mind, praying and lifting their hands. However, the act of lifting hands is logically and grammatically connected to praying. Logically, the lifting of hands makes no sense without the connection to praying. Why would a person just lift their hands—certainly not for the exercise? So, logically, the lifting of hands must be linked to that of prayer. Grammatically, lifting hands could be translated as expressing attendant circumstances, which sees the action as capable of being independent of the main verb, but it is best translated as an adverbial participle which sees the participle as dependent upon the main verb.<sup>3</sup> The secondary act of lifting hands is linked to the primary action of prayer in a dependent relationship. Thus, the lifting of hands should be done in conjunction with prayer. The desire is for men to pray. The lifting of their hands is describing what one does while praying. It is grammatically untenable to say that Paul desires men to lift their hands apart from prayer. His primary desire is that men pray. The lifting of hands is at most an assumed or suggested posture in prayer.

Three representative commentators give even less directive authority to this verse. Lea sees this not as prescribing a posture for prayer, but rather as describing the common practice of that day.<sup>4</sup> Kent views the hands as symbolic of a holy lifestyle.<sup>5</sup> Fee says the point is not that men should pray or lift hands, but rather when they do pray and lift their

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<sup>2</sup> The Great Commission has a main verb followed by three participles. These particles are seen by many as sharing the force of the main command. Thus the translation appears to be four commands instead of one. Christians are to go, make disciples, baptize them and teach them. While they are related they can be seen as independent actions.

<sup>3</sup> If a participle makes good sense when treated as adverbial participle, it is best not to treat it as attendant circumstance. Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar, Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 640.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Lea, *First and Second Timothy, Titus* (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 94.

<sup>5</sup> Homer Kent, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Chicago: Moody, 1982), 104-105.

hands, as was common in the first century, they are to do it without wrath or dissension.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, it is clear that this verse is not ordering or prescribing a physical position of the body that must be a part of Christian worship. The text describes the lifting of hands but falls short of prescribing the action. What then is the Biblical pattern for the use of hands in worship? My observation of lifting hands in today's worship services is in a time of exaltation and even joy. Here it is only linked to the very broad term "prayer." What kind of prayer? We must turn to the rest of Scripture to see if there is a Biblical pattern.

The only other passage in the NT that refers to the use of hands in worship or with a prayer is Luke 24:50. Here, Christ lifts His hands as He blesses the apostles. Christ is not requesting that the Father bless them, but rather He is performing the blessing Himself. This is not prescriptive for us in that it is not a prayer; rather it is a unique role of the Son just before He ascends into heaven. In contrast, the OT has numerous references.

### III. GENESIS 14:22

*And Abram said to the king of Sodom, "I have sworn [literally, lifted my hand] to the Lord God Most High, possessor of heaven and earth."*

Abram tells the king of Sodom that he has lifted up his hand to the Lord. The lifted hand is a sign of an oath. Both the NASB and the NIV take the liberty of translating the phrase as a figure of speech. Thus the literal "I have lifted my hand" becomes "I have sworn" in the NASB and the NIV adds the explanatory phrase, "and I have taken an oath." Here it is not an act of prayer. It is a legal sign of the intent of the one giving the oath. Abram was making the promise before his highest authority.

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<sup>6</sup> Gordon Fee, *First and Second Timothy* (San Francisco: Harper Row, 1984), 36.

## IV. DEUTERONOMY 32:40

*Indeed, I lift up my hand to heaven, and say, as I live forever.*

Within the context of a poem, Moses is affirming that God will bring justice. He does this by using the image of God taking an oath with an uplifted hand. Here again an uplifted hand is seen not as an act of prayer but a legal affirmation of one's intent.

## V. FIRST KINGS 8:22FF.

*(22) Then Solomon stood before the altar of the Lord in the presence of all the assembly of Israel and spread out his hands toward heaven.*

*(38) "Whatever prayer or supplication is made by any man or by all Thy people Israel, each knowing the affliction of his own heart, and spreading his hands toward this house.*

*(54) And it came about that when Solomon had finished praying this entire prayer and supplication to the Lord, he arose from before the altar of the Lord, from kneeling on his knees with his hands spread toward heaven.*

Solomon is dedicating the temple to the Lord. As he prays in front of the assembled congregation he stands before the altar and spreads his hands out toward heaven. The word for hands here is more specifically the palms of the hands. This clear act of prayer is a long request for God's action on behalf of Israel in hypothetical future situations. All the situations mentioned are times of great need. This lifting of hands then is not an offering of praise it is a request for help. This is reinforced in v 38 when an individual is seen as lifting up his hands with an afflicted heart.

## VI. EZRA 9:5

*Then, at evening sacrifice, I rose from my self abasement, with my tunic and cloak torn, and fell on my knees with my hands spread out to the Lord my God and prayed.*

The children of Israel are returning to the land after the exile which is not just geographical, but also spiritual. Just as they left Babylon they should leave sin behind them. Here Ezra is confessing, on behalf of the nation, the sin of intermarriage. Though he himself is not guilty, he leads the people to be contrite and sorrowful for their sin through example, and through recognizing the cooperate ramifications for individual sin. Ezra lifts his hands in confession and lament.

## VII. NEHEMIAH 8:6

*Ezra Praised the Lord, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen!, Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.*

Chronologically this general reading occurred before the specific confession of intermarriage in Ezra. Reconciling the time line for the two books we see that the general reading of the Pentateuch exposes the specific sin of intermarriage. As the word was read, the people lifted hands and shouted "Amen." This response to the general reading of God's law seems at first to be one of exuberance and praise. We must not take the modern practice, most common in smaller churches, of saying "amen" which expresses a joyful affirmation, to color our view of the Israelites' response. Here the nation is agreeing with the reading of the God's words to them, but their attitude is revealed as they fall prostrate before God. This mournful attitude is confirmed when the leaders instruct them not to mourn. This agreement of the people results not so much in hands lifted in exuberance, but rather the hands were lifted as they fell on their faces. It is a time of lament and grieving (v10).

The OT narratives present these examples, some in a worship setting, and others in a judicial or legal setting. Hands lifted in a judicial setting expressed affirmation or brought weight to the oath that was being uttered. In contrast, hands lifted in worship expressed lament. Thus, we can say these OT narrative examples lead us to assume that lifting hands in worship was an expression of lament. Perhaps, more apt for our discussion of worship practices is the Hebrew hymnbook.

## VIII. PSALM 28:2

*Hear my cry for mercy as I call to you for help,  
as I lift up my hands towards your Most Holy Place.*

David, in this lament Psalm, is lifting his hands in the direction of Jerusalem or the Holy of Holies. The rest of the psalm contains a highly emotional request. It is clear that David is in deep despair. The despair that he feels is expressed with his body in the lifting of his hands. His anxiety is that he would not become “like those who go down to the pit.” He is stating his fear of death. This psalm presents the very core of a man struggling with his life.

The direction of his reaching is significant. The “most holy place” is a reference to the Holy of Holies.<sup>7</sup> In David’s thinking this was the special dwelling place of God. The Jewish mind knew that God could not be contained in one place, but this place gave a point of reference. David, in a time of despair, prayed and used his hands to reach toward God’s reference point in his culture.

## IX. PSALM 44:20

*If we had forgotten the name of our God,  
Or spread out our hands to a foreign god,*

This psalm is also a lament but on a much larger scale. It is a national lament that follows a military defeat.<sup>8</sup> The reference is not directed toward YHWH, but rather in a denial that the nation “spread out their hands” to foreign gods. This would have been an act of pleading for help during a time of war. The psalm is lamenting the fact that the nation did not appeal to other gods and yet they were defeated. It is evident that the act of lifting or spreading hands in association with prayer came at a time of despair.

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<sup>7</sup> Peter Craigie, *Psalms 1-50* (Dallas, TX: Word, 1983), 238.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 331.

## X. PSALM 63:4

*I will praise you as long as I live,  
And in your name I will lift up my hands.*

This psalm is described as a trust psalm or as an individual lament.<sup>9</sup> It has a theme of hope but this hope or trust comes out of a time of despair. David states: “In your name I will lift up my hands.” At first, it seems this a time of exuberant praise, but the psalm begins, “O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water.” This is in contrast with the immediate context of verses 3-4a, but it is still within the context of a lament. The hands lifted to God again occur in association with a time of despair.

## XI. PSALM 88:9

*My eyes dim with grief, I call to you,  
O Lord, every day: I spread out my hands to you.*

The psalmist is Heman the Ezrahite, who was the leader of the Korahite guild. Apparently from I Chronicles, this was a type of choir of which Heman was the director. This trained musician in this lament is spreading out his hands to God in an act of despair, much as David did in Psalm 63. Here, hands are used to help express deep despair. “I spread out my hands to you.” “Do you show your wonders to the dead?” Vv 9-10. This is despair to the point of death. Again it is seen that the hands are used in a prayer during a time of extreme distress.

## XII. PSALM 134:2

*Lift up your hands in the sanctuary  
and praise the Lord*

This exhortation to lift up hands and praise God is directed to a specific group, described as those “who minister by night in the house of the

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<sup>9</sup> Bernhard Anderson, *Out of the Depths* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 175.

Lord.” These are those priests who guarded the Temple at night.<sup>10</sup> Apparently the worshiper is visiting the Temple at night, or had in the past and wanted to address those who were there.

By examining the words used for night and evening it can be seen that the worshiper was worshipping at an unusual time. The Hebrew word used here to express night is not the word for evening time, when sacrifices were offered. Night, as used here, is deep night. It was after the Temple had finished its official worshipping. At times this word is translated midnight.<sup>11</sup> This indicates that the psalmist had visited or was associated with the Temple at midnight type of hours. It is possible that this worshiper had come at night due to a time of despair or perhaps it is a time of joy. Either case is an argument from silence for the Psalm does not clearly indicate why the worship is taking place at an unusual hour.

In this Psalm the use of hands in worship can be associated with despair or joy. While it is not conclusive, my experience has been that special times of prayer are called when there is a crisis rather than a time of joy. The night time prayer meetings are normally called in times of great need such as those that were called on September 11, 2001. The times of celebration and joy are normally during the day or at regular times of worship. It is possible, and perhaps more probable, that this Psalm is written with a crisis in mind. Thus the lifting of hands could refer to a time of need.

### XIII. PSALM 141:2

*May my prayer be set before you like incense:  
May the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice.*

Once again the lifting of hands takes place in a lament Psalm.<sup>12</sup> Here the lament causes a prayer for God’s assistance in maintaining a Godly character in the face of opposition. The extent of the struggle is seen in vv 8b-9, “...do not give me over to death. Keep me from the snares they have laid for me, from the traps set by evil doers.” Again, it

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<sup>10</sup> Allen P. Ross, “Psalms” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, OT Edition, eds. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Dallas, TX: Victor, 1985), 888.

<sup>11</sup> Brown, Driver and Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 538.

<sup>12</sup> Anderson, 177. Willem A. VanGemeren, *Psalms: The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank Gaebelain (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 847.

is an extreme type of despair for life as seen in most of the other references.

Without exception, all the references to the lifting of hands to God in prayer are associated with times of varying degrees of despair. The uplifting of the hands in the book of Psalms is not in praise or thanksgiving but rather in petition. It is a petition of great despair rather than an everyday request that one might make to the Father. In the book of Psalms, lifting hands is limited to an exceptional request of help from God during a time of despair.

There are no references to lifting hands in prayer in the wisdom literature so we now turn to the last portion of the OT, the Prophets. Outside of the Book of Lamentations, the only reference to lifting hands in prayer is Isaiah's condemnation of false worship in which hands were lifted (1:15). Thus, the focus will be upon Lamentations.

#### XIV. LAMENTATIONS 1:17; 2:19; 3:41-42

*(1:17) Zion stretches out her hands:  
There is no one to comfort her...*

*(2:19) Arise, Cry aloud in the night at the beginning of the night watches; Pour out your heart like water; before the presence of the Lord; Lift up your hands to Him for the life of your little ones Who are faint because of hunger at the head of every street.*

*(3:41-42) We lift up our heart and our hands toward God in heaven: We have transgressed and rebelled, Thou hast not pardoned.*

In all of these the prophet Jeremiah is expressing a desperate calling on God. The first is a general cry for comfort. The second is crying out for the survival of children in a time of famine and the last is lamenting that God has not pardoned sin. As the title of the book suggests these are all offered at a time of deep lamentation.

#### XV. CONCLUSION

After examining all the references to lifting hands, some conclusions are in order. In the NT we heard Paul's desire for men to pray with the possibility of lifting hands. Since there was no further description of the

type of prayer that was associated with lifting hands, we turned to the OT. The practice of “lifting hands in prayer” in the OT is always associated with lament.<sup>13</sup> The only exception might be Psalm 134, but it is at least possible that this was a time of lament. At times, the lifting of hands is a very clear expression of lament. While other times, it is only in the context of lament, but, the context is always lament. So, it seems that we have a degree of confidence that the lifting of hands in prayer was a sign of dependence upon God most often in a time of lament.

As we hear Paul’s word to Timothy to “pray, lifting hands”, we must remember that Paul was well versed and well practiced in OT worship. Surely this has a bearing upon Paul’s intent. Is he not saying that our attitude in prayer should be that of one who lifts his hands in a humble lament? The physical act of lifted hands may accompany the prayer, but is not necessary.

When I was a student at Dallas Seminary a senior student mentioned to me that the President, Dr. John Walvoord, didn’t close his eyes during prayer. Somehow I could not image this patriarch disobeying a clear command of every Sunday school teacher. One day I decided to peek. I looked up during an opening prayer in a Theology class and sure enough Dr. Walvoord had his eyes open while he was praying and he was looking straight at me. If Dr. Walvoord could pray with his eyes open, then I suppose we can pray with our hands lifted. As joyful as many feel when they lift their hands they must remember that it may make others uncomfortable. Dr. Walvoord’s opened eyes didn’t offend anyone because those who felt that they must keep “every head bowed and every eye closed” had no opportunity to know that he didn’t follow their belief, unless like I, they peeked. Scripture tells us to be careful not to offend a brother (Rom 15:14) and to maintain the unity (Eph 4:3). If lifting hands during singing, praying, or even preaching causes disunity or offense, then it should be avoided. In some local church settings it would be offensive to *not* lift hands, even during preaching. This issue is offense and

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<sup>13</sup> Psalm 119:48 mentions the lifting of hands to God’s commandments. The verses preceding and following are expressing joy and delight in God’s Word. Thus, in parallel thought the lifting of hands in this situation expresses confidence and joy. This is in contrast to other references, but differs in that the lifting of hands is not to God or in prayer, but to His written word. Though this act of lifting hands is in the context of joy, it can still be seen as an expression of dependence upon the commandants of God.

disunity, not lifting hands. We can choose to put our hands down, but we must never put down unity. Though we raise our hands we must strive to never raise an offense.

At a previous church that I pastored, a humorous gift was given to a deacon who seemed to be charismatic-phobic. It was an *anti-charismatic kit* which contained a pair of gloves with each glove having a string attached to a brick. Obviously this playful kit was never used, but should we keep the principle behind it close at hand? Should we be ready to correct those who are lifting hands? Christ was very clear in the Sermon on the Mount that we are not to draw attention to ourselves when we pray. In some settings, lifting hands would draw undue attention to the person and thus should be avoided or at least tempered with restraint. In other settings, lifting of hands is part of the tradition and in yet another setting lifting hands is a new practice, but not offensive. While we must obey commands to maintain unity and not offend a brother, we must remember the examples of exuberant praise in the Psalms. Some of our churches have no sense of excitement in worship. Singing praises in the worship service is done with great restraint, but to shout for joy in the worship service is unthinkable. While the lifting of hands is not the point, a few lifted hands could help some of our churches breathe a little more deeply of the joy that is expressed in the Psalms.

So, is the professor who lifts his palms in a discreet expression of worship going against the Biblical teaching? Are the students who openly lift their hands while singing a song of praise in opposition to the Scripture? The answer is clearly, no. They are not going against Scripture. But let us change the question slightly. Are those who lift hands in praise obeying Scripture? Again the answer is, no. To lift hands in worship is neither prohibited nor commanded in Scripture. The Scriptures give a clear example of lifting hands being associated with lament and an appeal for help, but they do not give a clear command. The widespread practice of lifting hands in joyful praise rather than lament is not forbidden by Scripture, but neither is it exemplified. Thus, to lift our hands in praise is Biblically acceptable, but it is not Biblically mandated.

**THE USE AND ABUSE OF JOHN 3:16:  
A REVIEW OF  
MAX LUCADO'S BOOK  
3:16—THE NUMBERS OF HOPE**

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**I. INTRODUCTION**

It was Sir Francis Bacon who said: “Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested.”

Well, the moment I saw the title of pastor and best-selling author Max Lucado’s newest book, *3:16—The Numbers of Hope*,<sup>1</sup> as a person who is passionate about the Free Grace message, I was interested in chewing on what his take would be on the most important subject in the world—eternal life—and the meaning of John 3:16:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son,  
that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal  
life.

At the outset, allow me to say that you only have to read a few paragraphs before you are reminded about just how gifted a writer Max Lucado is. Whether you are reading about Nicodemus’s twilight encounter with Christ two millennia ago or an incident from only this past year, Lucado’s ability to paint a picture of what has transpired via interesting and relevant storytelling is nearly without parallel.

With great skill, what he does in the first twelve chapters is to take John 3:16 apart nearly word-by-word. For example, after introducing Nicodemus in chapter 1 (and the fact that people “must be born again”),

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<sup>1</sup> Max Lucado, *3:16—The Numbers of Hope* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2007).

in chapter 2 he focuses simply on *God* and His desire for the salvation of mankind (“For *God* so loved the world...”). Each chapter follows this pattern through chapter 12.

In chapter 3, Lucado concentrates on the phrase *the world* and helps people see their true spiritual condition—where they stand in relation to a holy God. In chapter 4, he centers his attention on the word *loved* and shares numerous examples of God’s love for sinful humanity. This is the pattern of the majority of the book (pp. 2-130)—a word or phrase from John 3:16 is highlighted and then multiple stories, Scripture texts, quotations, and illustrations are given for the purpose of illumination.

Chapter 13 is the concluding chapter containing an invitation to the unsaved. After his conclusion, the author includes forty pithy devotional chapters concerning the life of Christ that he encourages people to read once a day for forty days (pp. 131-214). The final section of the book contains sixty endnotes as well as a bibliography connected with the devotional section (pp. 215-19).

## II. SALVATION APART FROM WORKS

From the get go, Lucado comes across as believing in eternal salvation apart from good works. For instance, after quoting John 3:16 verbatim, Lucado writes:

A twenty-six word parade of hope: beginning with God, ending with life, and urging us to do the same. Brief enough to write on a napkin or memorize in a moment, yet solid enough to weather two thousand years of storms and questions. If you know nothing of the Bible, start here. If you know everything in the Bible, return here. We all need the reminder. The heart of the human problem is the heart of the human. And God’s treatment is prescribed in John 3:16.

He loves.  
He gave.  
We believe.  
We live.<sup>2</sup>

Lucado is emphatic that good works and human effort—even our best efforts—are not part of the new birth:

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

Unless one is born-again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”  
(v. 3, NKJV)

Behold the Continental Divide of Scripture, the international date line of faith. Nicodemus stands on one side, Jesus on the other, and Christ pulls no punches about their differences.

Nicodemus inhabits a land of good efforts, sincere gestures, and hard work. Give God your best, his philosophy says, and God does the rest.

Jesus’s [sic] response? Your best won’t do. You’re works don’t work. You’re finest efforts don’t mean squat. Unless you are born again, you can’t even see what God is up to.<sup>3</sup>

In reference to the encounter of Nicodemus and Jesus, Lucado contends that new birth is God’s work from “start to finish”:

Newborn hearts are born of heaven. You can’t wish, earn, or create one. New birth? Inconceivable. God handles the task, start to finish.

Nicodemus looks around the room at the followers. Their blank expressions betray equal bewilderment.

Old Nick has no hook upon which to hang such thoughts. He speaks self-fix. But Jesus speaks—indeed introduces—a different language. Not works born of men and women, but a work done by God.”<sup>4</sup>

Just a few pages later, the author underscores that it is belief in Christ and not good works that brings eternal life: “In the end, some perish and some live. And what determines the difference? Not works or talents, pedigrees or possessions. Nicodemus had these in hoards. The difference is determined by our belief. ‘Whoever *believes* in him shall not perish but have eternal life.’”<sup>5</sup>

In chapter 8, Lucado considers the word *believes* (“whoever *believes* in him shall not perish...”). After telling a story about a rock-climbing trip in which the guide asks Lucado to trust that she can hold the ropes he will be attached to, he writes:

Can I really trust that “whoever *believes* in him shall not perish”?

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 10.

Jesus's [sic] invitation seems too simple. We gravitate to other verbs. *Work* has a better ring to it. "Whoever works for him will be saved." *Satisfy* fits nicely. "Whoever satisfies him will be saved." But believe? *Shouldn't I do more?*

This seems to be the struggle of Nicodemus. It was his conversation with Christ, remember, that set the stage for John 3:16. Jesus's [sic] "you must be born again" command strikes the scholar—and some of us—the way the words of the take-a-leap girl struck me. What's my part? The baby takes a passive role in the birthing process. The infant allows the parent to do the work. Salvation is equally simple. God works and we trust. Such a thought troubles Nicodemus. *There must be more.*<sup>6</sup>

So once again, Lucado sees the reception of salvation as something simple—as a matter of trust and not works. In reference to Moses and the brazen serpent, Lucado states:

Snake-bit Israelites found healing by looking at the pole. Sinners will find healing by looking to Christ. 'Everyone who believes in him will have eternal life' (John 3:15 NLT).

The simplicity troubles many people. We expect a more complicated cure...

We'll find salvation the old fashioned way: we'll earn it...

Christ, in contrast says to us... 'Your part is to trust. Trust me to do what you can't.'<sup>7</sup>

In chapter 9, entitled, *God's Gracious Grip*, Lucado references a verse from Scripture that most popular writers ignore when he says:

Our spiritual legs have no strength. Our morality has no muscle. Our good deeds cannot carry us across the finish line, but Christ can. 'To the one who does not work, but believes *in Him* who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness' (Rom 4:5 NASB)."<sup>8</sup>

On the very next page, Lucado references John 10:28 and Eph 1:13, emphasizing that "a soul sealed by God is safe."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 76-77, italics his.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 78-79.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 84, italics his.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 85.

Apparently, the author does not believe that salvation can be lost:

When our children stumble, we do not disown them. When they fall, we do not dismiss them. We may punish or reprimand, but cast them out of the family? We cannot...

God, our Father, engenders the same relationship with us."<sup>10</sup>

In my overview thus far of the first twelve chapters, I have not enumerated all of the references that the author made to eternal life being apart from good works. But suffice it to say that in chapters 1-12, Lucado did a good job of presenting eternal life as being apart from good works. Does he specifically define what it means to believe in Jesus like the apostle John did in John 11:25-26?<sup>11</sup> No, he doesn't. And in the end, that becomes exceedingly problematic, as we shall see. But there are good illustrations of faith (pp. 75-77, 78, 83-85) and the author does an excellent job of portraying hell scripturally (pp. 93-101) as in other books he has written.<sup>12</sup> It was also nice to see a strong defense of the fact that pluralism is untrue and that all religions do not lead to heaven (pp. 86-89).

### III. CONFUSION REGARDING THE TERMS OF THE GOSPEL

As I said earlier, Lucado has a tremendous ability to share stories that do a great job of illustrating the truth he is trying to unfold in the

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>11</sup> In the "40 Days of Devotions" section (pp. 131-214), Lucado quotes John 11:25-26, calls Christ's question to Martha ("Do you believe this?") the "greatest question found in Scripture," and then makes the following comment: "There it is. The question that drives any responsible listener to *absolute obedience* to or total rejection of the Christian faith" (p. 180, emphasis mine). It is clear in 3:16 and in other books Lucado has written that he goes back and forth between a Free Grace view of salvation and a Lordship view of it.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Max Lucado, *And the Angels Were Silent* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1992), 136. There he writes, "We don't like to talk about hell, do we? In intellectual circles the topic of hell is regarded as primitive and foolish. It's not logical. 'A loving God wouldn't send people to hell.' So we dismiss it.

"But to dismiss it is to dismiss a core teaching of Jesus. The doctrine of hell is not one developed by Paul, Peter, or John. It is taught by Jesus himself."

minds of his readers. He is to be commended for that. Unfortunately, for every good illustration he comes up with which promotes the freeness of eternal life, there are others that indicate that Lucado is confused about the terms of the gospel. There are several places in the book where this is evident.

#### A. PROBLEM #1: USING VERSES ADDRESSED TO BELIEVERS TO ADDRESS UNBELIEVERS

There are quite a few instances in which the author, in attempting to get an important point across to his unbelieving readers, uses verses that were originally addressed to NT believers or to the nation of Israel.<sup>13</sup> He asks unbelievers to acknowledge their sinfulness before God and then uses 1 John 1:10 for support: “If we claim we have not sinned, we are calling God a liar and showing that his word has no place in our hearts” (NLT).<sup>14</sup> Careful study tells us that this verse concerns a *believer’s* fellowship with God and is not referencing unbelievers.

In another place, he encourages the unsaved not to resist the love of God and then, includes a verse that is obviously written to a Christian audience:

“Take in with all Christians the extravagant dimensions of Christ’s love. Reach out and experience the breadth! Test its length! Plumb the depths! Rise to the heights! Live full lives, full in the fullness of God” (Eph 3:18-19 MSG).<sup>15</sup>

I admit that this is a beautiful verse concerning the love of Christ, but why baffle a person you are trying to win to Christ via simple faith with admonitions such as “live full lives”? This is highly confusing to a person without Christ. Another instance similar to this occurs a few chapters later. Here the author is proclaiming the wonderful truth of the inclusiveness of the gospel—that *whoever* believes in Jesus has eternal life. But notice how quickly this proclamation becomes murky due to the texts he has chosen to reference:

*Whoever* acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. (Matt. 10:32)

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<sup>13</sup> Lucado, 3:16, 30, 40, 59, 66-67, 69, 71, 98, 99, 129.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

*Whoever* finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. (Matt. 10:39)

*Whoever* does God's will is my brother and sister and mother. (Mark 3:35)

*Whoever* believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. (Mark 16:16)<sup>16</sup>

If he had just left those four verses out, he would have had a powerful follow-up since the next five he includes are John 3:36; 4:14; 6:37; 11:26; and Rev 22:17—all great salvation verses! Again, these are just a few of the many instances where the author uses verses that were originally written to motivate believers either to enter a life of discipleship, or to continue in it, as proof-texts to unbelievers.

## B. PROBLEM #2: USING STORIES/ILLUSTRATIONS/CONCEPTS THAT CLOUD THE FREENESS OF ETERNAL LIFE

Lucado tells a story about a feeble elderly woman who takes part in a Lutheran communion service (p. 61). In attempting to illustrate that God will receive scarred and journey-hardened sinners, he employs a hazy quotation given by the priest to the woman that makes it sound as if receiving the elements is necessary to *retain* eternal life: "Our Lord Jesus Christ, whose body and blood you have received, preserve your soul unto everlasting life." Now I'll admit that when you get to the end of the story the author does attempt to clear things up a bit, but my question is this: why use such a confusing story to begin with? Why make it sound like communion is somehow connected with obtaining or maintaining eternal life?

Another example appears a bit later. Here we find the classic (and confusing) if-you-believe-in-the-chair-you-will-sit-in-it analogy. Just after telling his readers that Christ wants them to trust Him to do what they cannot, the author illustrates this by saying:

By the way, you take similar steps of trust daily, even hourly. You believe the chair will support you, so you set your weight on it. You believe water will hydrate you, so you swal-

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 66-67, italics his.

low it. You trust the work of the light switch, so you flip it.  
You have faith the doorknob will work, so you turn it.<sup>17</sup>

Both Zane Hodges and Bob Wilkin have written<sup>18</sup> about why this is a poor illustration of saving faith so I won't take the time to go into the issues here. But once again, my question is this: why use an illustration about faith if it actually results in confusing your unbelieving readership?

Here's another example. After speaking of a jet pilot who forgot to buckle up his seat belt, the author writes: "No one but Jesus 'buckles you in.' You may slip—indeed you will—but you will not fall. Hence the invitation to believe 'in him.'"<sup>19</sup> What does he mean when he says "you will not fall"? Is he continuing the figure of speech about a pilot who could fall to his death? Or is he speaking of no major spiritual defection? The latter seems likely since he starts by saying, "You may slip—indeed you will." That strongly implies that the falling is moral or doctrinal defection. Most likely he is saying that believers will never fall as long as they keep on trusting Jesus.

A page later, Lucado shares several splendid paragraphs concerning the fact that faith in Christ is sufficient for eternal life. For example, he says:

Christ came, not for the strong, but for the weak; not for the righteous, but for the sinner...he works and we trust, he dies and we live, he invites and we believe.

We believe *in him*. "The work God wants you to do is this: Believe the One he sent" (John 6:29 NCV).

Believe in yourself? No. Believe in him.

Believe in them? No. Believe in him.

And those who do, those who believe "in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).<sup>20</sup>

Now, if the author had stopped there, that would have been great...but he doesn't. To the tremendous words we have just read, Lucado adds: "How do we begin to believe? We turn to our Father for

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>18</sup> Zane C. Hodges, "How to Lead People to Christ, Part 2: Our Invitation to Respond," *JOTGES* 14:1 (Spring 2001): 11; Robert N. Wilkin, "Saving Faith in Focus," *JOTGES* 11:2 (Autumn 1998): 52.

<sup>19</sup> Lucado, 3:16, 87.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 88-89.

help.” What does that mean? We aren’t told. Maybe he means we should pray and ask God to show us what to believe (which is certainly a sound idea). But maybe he means we should pray and ask God to give us *faith* (as though it were some commodity). Once again, it is evident that Lucado is confused himself. If not, why would he make such a confusing statement immediately after such powerful words?

One of the most puzzling comments in the entire book is an illustration about someone’s atheistic aunt who was near death. Speaking of her final days he says,

The woman lived her life with no fear of God or respect for his Word. She was an atheist. Even in her final days, she refused to permit anyone to speak of God or eternity. Only her Maker knows her last thoughts and eternal destiny...<sup>21</sup>

*Say what?* Only her Maker knows her eternal destiny? Don’t we? If what Lucado is saying is true (that she was a lifelong atheist who died in unbelief) then why would only God know her eternal destiny? He seems too concerned about being judgmental, even about an unnamed atheist on her deathbed.

Throughout this book, Lucado affirms that faith in Christ apart from good works brings everlasting life. And yet, without missing a beat, he will interject a story, Bible verse, or a play on words that emphasizes the need for something beyond faith in Christ’s promise for eternal life—and it’s clear that he doesn’t even notice this tension!

### C. PROBLEM #3: USING NAMES AND TITLES THAT CLOUD THE FREENESS OF THE GOSPEL

As we saw earlier under Problem #1, even though the author is writing to unbelievers, he confusingly includes verses from Scripture that call people to follow Christ as devoted disciples. He makes this same mistake in how he chooses to address believers as well.

In chapter 7 entitled *Heaven’s “Whoever” Policy*, his goal is to help unsaved people understand that eternal life is offered to all: “*Whoever* unfurls 3:16 as a banner for the ages. *Whoever* unrolls the welcome mat of heaven to humanity. *Whoever* invites the world to God.”<sup>22</sup> This is beautiful! What an encouragement to the lost person! Unfortunately, as is true in many places in the book, the writer immediately shoots himself in

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 66, italics his.

the foot by making the reception of eternal life sound as if it is a life of following Christ:

Jesus could have easily narrowed the scope, changing *whoever* into *whatever*. “Whatever Jew believes” or “Whatever woman follows me.” But he used no qualifier. The pronoun is wonderfully indefinite.<sup>23</sup>

Isn't it clear that Lucado is equating belief in Christ with following Him? He does this again in at least two other places. Just after quoting the words of an unsaved woman on her deathbed, he writes: “Contrast her words with those of a Christ-follower.”<sup>24</sup> And if there was any doubt that the author likes to call those who have believed “Christ-followers,” the following reference should clarify the issue: “Christ-followers go public with their belief.”<sup>25</sup> Now don't get me wrong. I realize that some might take issue with me on this last one. But in context, the author is referencing a person who *has not yet gone public with his or her belief in Christ*. And yet, he still wants to call such a person a “Christ-follower.” Am I making a big deal over nothing? I don't think so. Here's why. In writing a book to an audience of unbelievers, every time an author uses a confusing word or concept, it makes it just that much harder to perceive and understand the grace of God. In Scripture, believers are believers and followers are followers. Believers are people who hear the promises of Christ concerning eternal life and believe what they hear (cf., John 3:16-18; 5:24; 6:47; 11:25-27). Followers are those who respond to Jesus' command to follow Him in a life of sacrificial devotion (cf., Matt 10:38; 16:24-27; 19:27-28; Mark 1:17-18; 8:34; Luke 5:11; 9:23; John 12:26), and whenever we blur these two concepts in speaking or writing to the unsaved, we make it just that much more difficult for them to understand saving grace.

Now I appreciate the fact that some might argue against what I am proposing and say, “But didn't Jesus say things like ‘My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, *and they follow Me*. And I give to them eternal life, and they shall never perish...’ (John 10:27-28a, italics added). Didn't He call believers *followers*?” Yes, He did. But a convincing argument has been made by Zane Hodges in his book *The Gospel Under*

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 66, italics his, underlining mine.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 129.

*Siege* that the word *follow* here is not a reference to discipleship but is one of the many descriptive illustrations for saving faith:

In John 10:27 the term “follow” is simply another Johannine metaphor for saving faith. Like the metaphors about receiving (1:12), drinking (4:14), coming (6:35, 37), eating bread (6:35), eating Christ’s flesh and drinking His blood (6:54) and others, it expresses the action in response to which eternal life is bestowed. When the Shepherd calls the sheep through His Word (and He knows who they are!), they respond to that call by following Him...

It is a mistake to construe the word “follow” in John 10:27 as though it indicates something about the nature of the believer’s experience *after* he receives eternal life. In fact it has nothing to do with that at all...<sup>26</sup>

It should be clear to all of us who believe in grace that, due to the fact that we live in a culture that is very confused about what a person must do to have eternal life, we need to be extra careful in the words, titles, and stories we employ as we evangelize and as we write.

Let’s consider one more example of how the author clouds the freeness of eternal life. In chapter 7, Lucado shares the story of leading his Uncle Billy to Christ just days before he passed away. But instead of describing his uncle as a last-minute or eleventh-hour *believer*, notice what monikers he decides to use: “A last-minute *confessor* receives the same grace as a lifetime *servant*...”<sup>27</sup> If I seem to be hypercritical, let’s remember that the author is writing this book to the unsaved. If the reader is Roman Catholic, the phrase “last-minute confessor” could easily bring to mind the idea of confessing sins to a priest just before death. On top of that, just four pages earlier (on p. 67), the author includes a verse about confessing Christ publicly in what is supposedly a list of verses referencing eternal life.

#### D. PROBLEM #4: USING THE “SINNER’S PRAYER” IN EVANGELISM

What did Lucado say to lead his Uncle Billy to Christ on his deathbed? Even if Lucado does not believe that a prayer is necessary to

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<sup>26</sup> Hodges, Zane C., *The Gospel Under Siege: A Study on Faith and Works* (Dallas, TX: Redención Viva, 1982), 44-45.

<sup>27</sup> Lucado, *3:16*, 71, italics mine.

be saved, there is no doubt that he uses this method in his personal evangelism:

“Bill, are you ready to go to heaven?”

His eyes, for the first time, popped open. Saucer wide. His head lifted. Doubt laced his response: “I think I am.”

“Do you want to be sure?”

“Oh yes.”

Our brief talk ended with a prayer for grace.<sup>28</sup>

Lucado went on to this application: “Request grace with your dying breath, and God hears your prayer. *Whoever* means ‘whenever.’”<sup>29</sup>

In his concluding chapter, Lucado again encourages the unsaved to pray for eternal life:

You need to give God your answer: “Christ will live in you as you open the door and invite him in” (Eph 3:17 MSG). Say yes to him. Your prayer needs no eloquence, just honesty.

*Father, I believe you love this world. You gave your one and only Son so I can live forever with you. Apart from you, I die. I choose life. I choose you.*<sup>30</sup>

Now someone might say, *What’s so bad about prayer? Isn’t this a picky objection?* In reality, no. In the Bible, neither the Lord Jesus, Paul, nor any of the other apostles ever shared the message of eternal life and afterwards asked: “Would you like to bow your head and ask God to save you?” They didn’t because the fundamental issue is whether the person *believes* the saving message that the evangelist has just shared with him or her, not whether he prays some prayer.

There are a lot of people who will pray a prayer, asking God to save them, when in reality they do not believe the saving message. Can a person pray and simultaneously believe in Christ for eternal life? Of course. But can a person pray and yet not believe in Christ for eternal life? Unfortunately, yes—and multitudes of people have done so. Maybe they prayed the sinner’s prayer because they wanted to get rid of the evangelist. Or like many, maybe they prayed this prayer every night because

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 71, italics his.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 129, italics his.

they could never get assurance of salvation. Since this is so often the case, the bottom line is this: as people of the Word, we should look to Jesus as our example in evangelism and not to the traditions of men.

We should not cloud the issue of evangelism by importing the man-made doctrine of “praying for God to save you.” Rather, we should encourage unbelievers to carefully consider the claims of Christ and to believe Him—to take Him at His word: “And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?” (John 11:26).

#### IV. CONFUSION REGARDING BELIEF AND PUBLIC CONFESSION

After reading the first twelve chapters, if you are still wondering where the author stands in relation to the gospel, the conclusion of the book makes it clear. He doesn’t really believe that faith in Christ *alone* brings eternal life but that public confession is also necessary:

*Father, I believe you love this world. You gave your one and only Son so I can live forever with you. Apart from you, I die. With you, I live. I choose life. I choose you.*

If you aren’t sure you’ve told him, you haven’t. We can’t get on board and not know it. Nor can we get on board and hide it. No stowaways permitted. Christ-followers go public with their belief. We turn from bad behavior to good (repentance). We stop following our passions and salute our new captain (confession). We publicly demonstrate our devotion (baptism).

We don’t keep our choice a secret. Why would we? We’re on our way home for Christ’s sake.<sup>31</sup>

This is classic Lordship thought. Salvation is found only in Christ but you must profess your faith openly because no stowaways are permitted! All who truly believe will go public with their belief. And if that wasn’t enough, the author throws repentance, confession, and baptism in the mix as well. Now someone might say, “He’s not saying that those things are *necessary* for eternal life, but something that all true believers will do.” I don’t think so. Lucado clearly says that a person cannot be-

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 129, italics his, underlining mine.

lieve in Christ and hide it—that believers go public with their belief. He says that stowaways (people who profess faith in Christ and hide it publicly) are not permitted! No, it is clear that in spite of a lot of excellent writing earlier in the book about salvation apart from works, in the end, Max Lucado doesn't believe that salvation is by faith in Christ alone. It is obvious that he believes that public confession is also necessary (and repentance, baptism, absolute obedience, prayer, and following Christ as well).<sup>32</sup> How sad. The truth of John 3:16—that whoever believes in Him has everlasting life—now becomes the message that whoever believes in Him and openly confesses Him is permitted on board! This is a tragic and confusing end to a book that begins with so much promise and hope. In the end, the unbelieving reader discovers that faith in Christ is not really all God requires for eternal life but that the fine print includes other stipulations.

## V. CONCLUSION

It is clear that the author is confused about what a person must do to have eternal life. In spite of the fact that this book is recommended by famous and prominent people from all walks of life (like actor Tim Conway, Pastor Rick Warren, and Texas Governor Rick Perry)<sup>33</sup> as a primer regarding salvation, Lucado can't make up his mind on what one must do to be saved. On one page, salvation is granted to those who simply believe. On another, only believers who publicly profess their faith are permitted. If he really understands the Biblical condition for eternal life, why do we see this? If he believes that Christ gives eternal life apart from good works (which he writes so eloquently about in so many places), then why does he drift into Lordship thought so often? Why do we find him calling for *absolute obedience* (p. 180)? The only answer is that the author is simply confused. If you could personally ask him if he believes that faith alone in Christ alone saves a person forever the moment they believe (apart from confession, etc.), based on what he has written in this book, his answer would have to be “no.”

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., pp. 66, 71, 129, 180.

<sup>33</sup> At the very beginning of the book there are “*Reflections on 3:16 the verse*” as well as “*Reflections on 3:16 the book.*” This is prior to the “Contents” and no page numbers are given.

If you want a book that both a Lordship advocate and a Free Grace advocate might tolerate (with neither being fully satisfied), then this book is for you. But if you want a book to lead an unbeliever to faith in Christ for eternal life, then I suggest you look elsewhere.

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# BOOK REVIEWS

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***Interpreting the New Testament: Introduction to the Art and Science of Exegesis.*** Edited by Darrell L. Bock and Buist M. Fanning. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006. 480 pp. Cloth, \$29.99.

This work was done to honor Dr. Harold Hoehner, the Chairman of the New Testament Department at Dallas Theological Seminary for many years, including the seven years I was there for my master's and doctoral work. I am, as most of the contributors to this volume readily admitted, deeply indebted to Dr. Hoehner. He helped me to grow in my ability to interpret the Word of God.

This work is designed to be a textbook for seminary and Bible college classes on how to exegete the NT. It contains 26 chapters. Thirteen chapters deal with exegetical methods and procedures (pp. 23-310). Thirteen chapters deal with exegetical examples and reflections (pp. 313-461).

The science of exegesis is covered fairly well in this work. While there are elements which I feel are missing or which are handled incorrectly (see below), the discussion is reasonably thorough and extensive. I would think second or third year students of NT Greek would benefit from this book if they are well aware of the deficiencies, some of which I cite below.

I found the chapters on textual criticism, lexical analysis, epistolary genre, application, and the so-called Ethiopian eunuch of Acts 8:26-40 to be the best and most helpful.

Probably the most significant of all the chapters is the opening one by Dr. Darrell Bock entitled, "Opening Questions: Definition and Philosophy of Exegesis" (pp. 23-32). While there is much helpful material in this chapter, I found one aspect of the chapter to be troubling. One of Bock's main points is that the NT exegete must appreciate three things. The third of his three points shows a major flaw in the exegetical method proposed in this book.

First, the exegete must appreciate how to read texts. This means he must give "serious and careful consideration of the text and what the author sought to communicate through it" (p. 28). This is excellent.

Second, the exegete must appreciate the role of the reader. By this Bock is referring primarily to the modern reader, not the first readers: “What a reader sees and how a reader reads is determined not only by what is in the text but by how the reader is prepared to read by his or her culture, theological perspective, personal background, and appreciation of the text’s setting. As much as we may wish to try, we cannot make ourselves blank slates as readers when approaching a text. We are better off appreciating how this influences our reading than to pretend we can entirely neutralize these factors” (p. 29). While such a view is a bit pessimistic (and postmodern) and tends to underestimate the work of the Spirit in our study of the Word of God (more on this below), I do appreciate this caution.

Third, the exegete must appreciate the role of communities. This is the point which I feel is a major weakness in this chapter and the book as a whole. Bock puts it this way: “One way to check the undisciplined reading of a text is to appreciate that the Bible functions within communities of readers...From a historical point of view, the Bible has been read and studied for centuries...Although the goal of exegesis is to make the student competent in making exegetical judgments, this goal is not reached by a kind of solitary exegesis in isolation from the discussion that has swirled around texts” (p. 30).

I certainly agree that it is helpful for an exegete to consult grammars, lexicons, commentaries, and journal articles. This aids him in knowing existing views and arguments for those views. However, that consultation should be done *after* one has independently exegeted a passage on his own. The danger in consulting sources *first* is the reader is no longer studying the NT for himself. Instead, he is studying what others say about the NT. He will often be blinded to the meaning the author intended because no one in his community even mentions that view. More than one leading Evangelical scholar has ruled as ridiculous and out of hand some of the views of Zane Hodges, Jody Dillow, and others precisely because they are not widely held in the Evangelical community.

It is easy to see why Dispensationalism is dying. If exegesis occurs in community, and if the Evangelical community does not believe the NT teaches Dispensationalism, then it is only a matter of time before Dispensationalism as we know it will cease to exist. This is especially true since Dispensationalism did not appear until the middle of the nineteenth century. The community hermeneutic essentially makes any view that is not the historic teaching of Christianity to be highly suspect if not clearly

wrong. This means that even justification by faith alone is highly suspect since this is a relative recent development and since most Evangelicals today do not believe it.

While I think it was an error to even mention the role of community in exegesis, I would think that pages of disclaimers should have followed if such a position were stated. But there are no disclaimers. The student should have been told, but is not, that he himself will appear at the Judgment Seat of Christ, not his community. He himself will be evaluated for what he teaches (Jas 3:1). He won't be able to say, "But the community that You gave me told me such and so was true." The student should be told that the majority is on the broad path of destruction and that most in Evangelicalism are not even regenerate. But he is not.

When I was a student in seminary, my favorite professor, Zane Hodges, required his students to study a passage for themselves and draw their conclusions first before going to the commentaries and journal articles to see what others said. Today that no longer seems to be the case. I've heard scores of exegetical papers presented at various conferences over the past 20 years, and except in Free Grace and Pre-Trib circles, I've rarely heard someone actually exegete the text. What I've heard most of the time is speakers who survey and sometimes slightly tweak the views of others about a given text.

This community hermeneutic is certainly not stressed in this book in terms of the amount of pages explicitly devoted to it. But it is promoted in the opening chapter and in the chapters on lexical analysis (e.g., p. 152) and on validation (e.g., pp. 155-56). That is enough to make this an emphasis in the book, and there are no cautions given. The idea of the importance of community is in the background of the entire book. This is unfortunate.

*JOTGES* readers will be bothered by references to *final salvation* (p. 446), the already inaugurated kingdom (p. 374), realized eschatology (p. 372), and assurance by works (p. 459 n 22).

Regarding the role of the Holy Spirit in exegesis, slightly more than a page is devoted by Bock to this question (pp. 31-32 top). Frankly his explanation is hard to follow. Another reviewer, Dr. Bill Heth of Taylor University, understood him to be saying the following, "The Holy Spirit's role in biblical interpretation is not to help the modern-day reader know *the meaning* of the text (which only comes through hermeneutically sound exegesis) but to help the reader welcome it as applicable to one's life and [to] correlate God's truth with the whole of Scripture (p.

31)” (*JETS*, March 2008, pp. 132-33, italics his). It should be noted that Bock does say that the Spirit “helps us get to the meaning,” and helps us to “more fully appreciate the text’s meaning and import” (p. 31). However, taking the entire section as a whole, including the words, “The meaning of Scripture is available to any careful reader as a matter of comprehension” (p. 31), I’d say that Heth has accurately captured the position of Bock and evidently of Dallas Theological Seminary on the role of the Spirit in exegesis.

I am very bothered by this view. Quite a few passages in Scripture make it clear that comprehending the Word does require the work of the Spirit in our lives (Ps 119: 12, 18, 19, 26, 27, 34, 73; Luke 8:18; 19:26; 24:27, 32, 45). Exegesis is not merely a matter of correct technique. The work of the Spirit is more than merely helping us apply and appreciate the Word.

After reading the book and meditating on what I’d read, it hit me that what is *not* said in this book is rather startling. The following are *not* mentioned as important to exegeting the NT: prayer, the work of the Spirit (see previous paragraph), the analogy of faith, the role of meditation on the text, the role of a mentor in learning the science and art of exegesis, the Bema (see Jas 3:1), the perspicuity of Scripture, milk of the Word versus meat of the Word, Dispensationalism, inerrancy, and inspiration.

I highly recommend this book for pastors and Christian educators. It is exceedingly helpful in learning what theological students are being taught today in terms of how to exegete the NT. I would also recommend it for laypeople who wish to have a better grasp of what the next generation of pastors is being taught about how to interpret the NT.

**Robert N. Wilkin**

Editor

*Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*

Irving, Texas

*A Theology of Inclusivism.* By Neal Punt. Allendale, MI: Northland Books, 2008. 263 pp. Paper, \$14.95

The author, Neal Punt, is a retired pastor in the Christian Reformed Church and a graduate of Calvin College.

Punt's thesis is that Calvinists should not say, "All persons will be finally lost except those the Bible declares will be saved," but instead, "All persons will be saved except those who the Bible declares will be finally lost" (pp. 8-9). In his view the vast majority of mankind will be saved and only a small percentage of people will be lost (pp. 30-38, 156). Of course, most Calvinists believe just the opposite.

In terms of those who have never heard about Jesus, Punt takes the view that they will be judged based on how they responded to what had been made known to them. Like Pinnock (who Punt favorably cites on p. 156), faith in Jesus is not required if a person has never heard about Him (pp. 10, 28, 64-65).

Oddly Punt includes one chapter written by someone else, famed annihilationist Edward Fudge. In a chapter called "Restoring Hell" Fudge argues, with Punt's approval, that the lost will be annihilated once and for all and that no human being will spend eternity in hell (pp. 190-97).

Lordship Salvation is advocated by Punt. To be numbered among the saved one must repent, believe, and obey (pp. 213-14). Punt does not discuss precisely what a person who has heard of Jesus must believe, or what a person who hasn't heard of Jesus must believe.

According to Punt we should view everyone as a child of God for whom Christ died (p. 179) and we should view all strangers who visit our churches "as one of us" (p. 184). When we do get around to wondering who the few are in the world that are lost, Punt says, "We can only judge their deeds" (p. 183).

In order to argue that most will ultimately get into the kingdom, Punt of necessity argues for unlimited atonement (pp. 158-70). This is a good discussion most *JOTGES* readers would enjoy.

It is sad to read a book in which the author departs so drastically from the Scriptures. Most are on the broad way that leads to destruction, not the narrow way that leads to life. Hell is a place of conscious, eternal torment for all who fail to believe in Jesus for eternal life while they are still alive. No one will be annihilated. The sole condition of eternal life is faith in Christ, not repentance, belief in some unstated object, and obedience.

This book is definitely not for new or untaught believers. I recommend it only for pastors, elders, and others who wish to be well informed about the inclusivist position in Evangelicalism today.

**Robert N. Wilkin**

Editor

*Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*

Irving, TX

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***The Truth Is Out There***, By Thomas Bertoneau and Kim Paffenroth, Grand Rapids: Brazo Press, 2006. 272 pp. Paper, \$18.99

This book was obviously written with a view towards science fiction fans with watered down faith. The authors attempt to show Christian undertones in popular science fiction T.V. shows and movies and even specify a particular facet of Christian beliefs for each movie or television program reviewed.

The introduction is one of the most interesting parts of the books because it covers some interesting parallels between Plato's writings and Biblical accounts. It's interesting to see how the Plato's account of Atlantis and the Atlanteans is compared to the tower of Babel and how the people are punished for their arrogance and lack of humility.

From there, the book goes on to discuss how the popular British show, *Dr. Who*, carries the themes of propitiating the gods and of self-sacrifice, and somehow it is supposed to show that Jesus demands no sacrifice from us. I understood what the authors were attempting to do in comparing *Dr. Who* to gospel themes, but it is quite a stretch.

Another chapter compares Star Trek's morality with that of Christians as well as having a "Biblical tradition of tearing down false idols" (p. 65). Star Trek is also supposed to show Biblical self-sacrifice because of how Kirk, Spock, and McCoy each offer to lay down their life for their friends (in different episodes, of course).

Chapter 4 is the chapter I thought would contain more of the meat of the book. It is titled, "Sin and Grace: The Twilight Zone," and here we are supposed to see how several different episodes of this show represent the Biblical concept of sin and grace. We are given several examples of how man is first faced with his own evil and then given a second chance.

Some people receive grace through the ability to return to their childhood (pp. 148-50). Some are faced by their sin and are then able to feel empathy for those they hurt (pp. 150-54). Others are given the grace to accept death for something they did not do (pp. 154-55), and still others have the opportunity to sacrifice themselves for friends or family (pp. 156-58).

Though there are some interesting comparisons between the authors' favorite science fiction shows and the Bible, this book is not something one would read for education or edification. I wouldn't recommend this book for anything other than a fun and easy read. There are very few Biblical references and when they are used, it is a stretch to see how they would apply to the show in question.

**Kyle Kaumeyer**  
Grace Evangelical Society  
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# PERIODICAL REVIEWS

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**“The Gospel in the Gospels: Answering the Question ‘What Must I Do to Be Saved?’”** Edmund K. Neufeld, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (June 2008): 267-96.

Neufeld, a pastor and seminary professor in Manitoba, Canada, follows a recent trend in NT scholarship. He argues that Jesus taught salvation by works in the Synoptic Gospels. And Neufeld makes this argument from a Calvinistic framework.

What is somewhat unique about this article is that Neufeld begins by clarifying what he is not discussing. He says that there are two important and related questions that he is not discussing, but which the reader must understand are vital as well.

The first question is this: “‘On what basis does a holy and just God grant me salvation, eternal life, and kingdom entrance?’ The NT answers this first question with Jesus the Christ, his merits, and the atonement he accomplished on behalf of his people” (p. 267). If we overlook the implied limited atonement in his answer (and the failure to capitalize pronouns related to God), Neufeld makes a great point here. What God needed to do to give us eternal life is not the same as what we must do to have that life. Those are separate questions.

Neufeld continues, “Second, ‘How can I be saved,’ also involves, ‘How can God act to graciously bring people to himself?’ The NT answers this with activities such as electing, convicting, calling, and enabling” (p. 267). This too is helpful. What God does to bring us to Himself is not the same as what we must do to be born again.

Unfortunately, though the article starts well, the remainder of this thirty-page article is very disappointing, though very enlightening. The main value in the rest of the article is to show the sad state of Calvinism and NT scholarship today.

Neufeld first goes through the condition for eternal life/salvation in Matthew. His answer is “People enter [Jesus’ kingdom] by giving Jesus complete loyalty, by choosing him over family and possessions and life itself” (p. 279). He then continues, “They show their allegiance by obeying what he taught, which is at root a deep generosity to all others

that extends to loving enemies by not retaliating or judging them but forgiving and showing mercy” (p. 279). Thus Neufeld sees two conditions for salvation from hell in Matthew, committing one’s life to Christ and then following up that commitment with lifelong obedience. Amazingly Neufeld says nothing about believing in Jesus as a condition for eternal life. Calvinists have formerly said that the condition of eternal life is believing in Jesus but that believing in Him includes or results in works. Neufeld says that condition is simply works (though he reverses himself somewhat in the conclusion; see the second to last paragraph below).

Jesus’ teachings in Mark are the next focus for Neufeld. His conclusion is essentially the same, that Jesus required “a saving obedience so radical that people would not consider [doing] it for anything less than eternal life itself” (p. 284). Jesus in Mark required “ultimate commitment” in order to gain eternal life (p. 284).

In Luke Neufeld not surprisingly finds the same condition for eternal life, but with a twist. “The Third Gospel *usually* speaks of receiving eternal life in terms of some active obedience. This includes being merciful, being more loyal to Jesus than any other in the face of opposition, even to losing one’s life, and living obediently to Jesus” (p. 290, italics added). But then we find this fascinating exception: “Mingled with all these are a few stories, exemplified most clearly by the thief on the cross, in which people receive eternal life simply by asking contritely” (p. 290). Though this seems like a contradiction, Neufeld has an answer: “Our reader would assume that those who ask for mercy would also change their lives” (p. 290).

In the final section of the paper, entitled “V. Concluding Observations,” the author discusses the relationship between faith and active obedience. “The NT never separates trusting Christ from obeying Christ, never opposes faith to these obedient works; it never says or suggests that one is saved by believing in Christ rather than by obeying him. Instead, as we have seen, the Synoptics normally attach eternal life to obeying Jesus, and occasionally to trusting him” (p. 293). A bit later he explains that the idea that faith and works are separable is a false dualism. “Contemporary thinking wrongly distinguishes right faith from right actions...” (p. 295). “If there is no saving obedience, there is no saving faith. Jesus calls for faith by calling for actions that require faith... Faith versus works comes from an imported [ancient] dualism. The Synoptic

Jesus was content to attach eternal life to an obedience that by its nature required great faith” (p. 295).

I highly recommend this article for the person who is well grounded. However, I do not recommend it for the person who is new to the faith or who is not yet well taught.

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*Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*

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**“Origin of the Constellations at Babel”** Jonathan F. Henry, *Journal of Dispensational Theology* (March 2008): 5-19.

A few years ago a friend gave me a book which argued that God placed the gospel message in the stars. I remember skimming it and coming away being unconvinced, feeling that the evidence was not strong enough to prove the point.

This article, by a scientist who teaches at Clearwater Christian College, does an outstanding job of discussing the view. However, that is not the primary purpose of the article, as the title shows.

Henry argues persuasively that the Biblical account of Babel and the flood is supported by the fact that historically as well as today people groups around the world have quite similar names for the constellations. This would only be the case if there were a time when all people groups lived together and shared a common language.

The author also, however, debunks the idea that the gospel is in the stars. “Biblical references to constellations merely assert that God, not pagan deities, controls the stars in the constellations. Biblical references to constellations are therefore a rebuttal of ancient and modern astrology, not proof of a ‘gospel in the stars’” (p. 15).

The history of the argument that the gospel is in the stars receives a brief but helpful treatment by Henry. He discusses Frances Rollston, who originated the idea in 1862, and those who published books in agreement with her, including E. W. Bullinger, Kenneth C. Fleming, and Joseph R. Seiss.

“Was there ever a need for a Gospel in the stars?” Henry asks (p. 18). He cites Gen 3:15, the proto-evangelium, or first gospel, that God gave to Adam and Eve, as well as Enoch’s prophecy about the second

coming of Christ (Jude 14-15) as proof that long before the Pentateuch God “had prophesied the coming of His Son to earth” both directly (i.e., speaking Himself) and through His prophets (p. 18).

I particularly appreciated the last sentence in the article: “God in all dispensations has given special revelation to mankind through His chosen prophets and His written Word, this last being the exclusive source of special revelation since the close of the apostolic age” (p. 19).

The author calls the so-called *gospel in the stars* proposal a “Christian myth” (p. 6 n. 6). In that fascinating footnote he briefly mentions and gives counter arguments to three other Christian myths: the NASA computer that jammed when it “found” Joshua’s long day; the Soviet drilling project that was supposedly terminated when operators heard screams from hell; and Darwin’s supposed deathbed conversion (p. 6 n. 6).

This is an excellent article and I highly recommend it.

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