

The Free Grace Gospel — Clarifying the Issues

By Bob Nyberg

Introduction

Sally and Jane are on opposite sides of the abortion debate. Sally is “pro-choice,” whereas Jane is “pro-life.” As they discuss their views, Jane says that the term “pro-choice” is really misleading and should rightfully be called “pro-abortion.” Sally protests that the term “pro-abortion” mischaracterizes her position. The term “pro-abortion” implies that she advocates all pregnant women should have an abortion. Sally insists that the term “pro-abortion” misrepresents her true belief, which is that women should have a choice regarding their own bodies. Sally and Jane continue to argue about terminology, when the real issue is the fact that millions of babies die in the womb each year. Whether to use the terms “pro-choice” or “pro-abortion” is really secondary and distracts from the real issue.

A similar distraction has occurred between those who advocate “lordship salvation” and those who advocate a “free grace gospel.” Those advocating “lordship salvation” often refer to the other side as “the no lordship” proponents. They prefer to characterize the “free grace” position as those who deny the Lordship of Christ. Unfortunately, this terminology only muddies the waters, rather than clarifying the real issues in the debate. Years ago, Lance Latham clearly defined the “free grace” position when he stated:

Surely we must recognize WHO HE IS, or we will die in our sins (John 8:24). But this is vastly different from making Him your Lord in your life, in other words, promising to obey the rest of your life. This latter is preaching “works.” His mercies, with all His graciousness to us, WILL LEAD us to making Him Lord, and that out of a heart of love and appreciation of Him.

We feel that those who propose this way of salvation change the obvious meaning of Romans 10:9 to justify this:.

That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.

This CANNOT be made to say, “make Him Lord of your life.”¹

Lance continues:

Believing on Christ is distinctly not “turning the direction of your life over to Him.” *It is looking in faith to our Saviour crucified for our sins on Calvary! It is not of works, devotion or full surrender. It is His work and His death that avails.*²

As Lance explains, the real issue has nothing to do with the Deity or Lordship of Christ. To characterize the “free grace” position as “no lordship” is simply a diversion from the real issues.

In recent years, an “in house” debate has developed among those advocating the “free grace” position. But lately, the real issues have been clouded because of terminology.

¹Lance B. Latham; *The Two Gospels* (Rolling Meadows, Illinois, 1984), p. 46.

² *Ibid.* p. 54

A Brief History

In 2000, Zane Hodges wrote an article entitled, “How to Lead a Person to Christ, Part 1: The Content of our Message.” The article appeared in the *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*. Part 2 of this series appeared in the Spring 2001 journal issue.

Later, Pastor Gregory P. Sapaugh wrote a rebuttal to Zane, which is posted on the Grace Evangelical Society’s webpage.³ Pastor Sapaugh begins his paper by stating:

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

Then he concludes his paper with:

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

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

I agree with Pastor Sapaugh regarding the core issues in this debate. I might restate those issues in the form of two questions:

1. What is the content of faith for people living in this dispensation? In other words, what must a person believe today in order to be saved?
2. Has the content of faith changed after the cross? Or was an Old Testament saint saved by believing the same message that a New Testament saint trusts in?

In my opinion, these are the two critical issues in this debate. These should be at the forefront of our discussion. However, it appears that “terminology” has once again pushed the real issues to the back burner.

Pastor Tom Stegall is writing a series of papers that challenge Zane Hodges’ approach to “Leading a Person to Christ.” This series is entitled, “The Tragedy of the Crossless Gospel.” Those who are in Zane’s camp take issue with this term “crossless gospel.” They insist that the cross is essential for salvation. In other words, the fact that Christ died on the cross is the basis of salvation. His work on the cross is what procured salvation for mankind. Therefore the term “crossless gospel” is highly misleading.

³ <http://www.faithalone.org/journal/2001ii/sapaugh.pdf>

Rather than “crossless gospel,” maybe a better term to use is “minimalist gospel.” In his two part series, Zane addresses the question, “what is the barest minimum amount of information that a person needs to know in order to be saved?” With that in mind, I will use the term “minimalist gospel” for Zane’s position. But even that could be construed as an attempt to stigmatize Zane’s position. In using that term, I’m not saying that Zane is attempting to minimize the message of the gospel. I’m only focusing on what Zane sees as the bare minimum for a gospel presentation. The basic question is, “how much does someone need to understand about the person and work of Christ in order to be saved?” Or, what is the content of faith?

What is the Content of Faith?

Many in the “free grace camp” see Paul’s outline, found in 1 Corinthians 15, as being the bottom line essentials of the gospel. Paul begins in verse 1 with the statement, “Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you.” In verses 3-4 he summarizes the content of this gospel message: “For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures.”

Charles Ryrie, representing the traditional position of the “free grace camp,” states:

Facts are essential. In describing the Gospel he preached, Paul said it was “that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the scriptures (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). These historical and doctrinal facts are “of first importance,” for without them there is no Gospel.⁴

Paul gives us the precise definition of the Gospel we preach today in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8. The Gospel is the good news about the death and resurrection of Christ. He died and He lives—this is the content of the Gospel. The fact of Christ’s burial proves the reality of His death. He did not merely swoon only to be revived later. He actually died and died for our sins. The inclusion of a list of witnesses proves the reality of His resurrection. He died for our sins and was buried (the proof of His death); He rose and was seen by many witnesses, the majority of whom were still alive when Paul wrote 1 Corinthians (the proof of His resurrection). This same twofold content of the good news appears again in Romans 4:25: He “was delivered up ... and was raised.” Everyone who believes in that good news is saved, for that truth, and that alone, is the Gospel of the grace of God (1 Corinthians 15:2).⁵

To believe in Christ for salvation means to have confidence that He can remove the guilt of sin and give eternal life. It means to believe that He can solve the problem of sin which is what keeps a person out of heaven. You can also believe Christ about a multitude of other things, but these are not involved in salvation. ... That issue is whether or not you believe that His death paid for all your sin and that by believing in Him you can have

⁴ Charles C. Ryrie, *So Great Salvation* (Wheaton, Illinois, 1989), p. 30.

⁵ *Ibid.* p. 39

forgiveness and eternal life. ... The essential facts are that Christ died for our sins and rose from the dead (1 Corinthians 15:3-4; Romans 4:25).⁶

Ryrie, and the traditional wing of the “free grace camp,” see Paul’s summary of the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15 as being the bare essentials. The content of faith, in the simplest terms, is that “Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures.” Pastor Sapaugh put it this way: “I believe the ‘bottom line’ of the gospel message is the substitutionary sacrifice for sin by Christ on the cross.”

However, the “free grace minimalist” view has a different interpretation of 1 Corinthians 15. They see the term gospel (or good news) in this passage as being a message for the saved, and not for the unsaved. Bob Wilkin (president of The Grace Evangelical Society) summarizes their interpretation:

The good news in First Corinthians is the good news that Paul preached to the believers, not unbelievers, in the church in Corinth. The good news message he preached was Christ crucified. This was a sanctification message that a divided church needed to hear badly ... The reason we don’t find justification by faith alone anywhere in 1 Cor 15:3-11 is because this was sanctification good news.⁷

Therefore, since 1 Corinthians 15 is not the gospel for the unsaved, then using it in a gospel presentation to the lost is misapplying that portion of scripture. According to the minimalist view, the death of Christ on the cross is not an essential element of the gospel message to the lost. If it is used at all, the death of Christ should only be mentioned to help the lost person understand that the Person of Christ is trustworthy. In the minimalist view, the focus is on the Person of Christ and His offer of eternal life. The Work of Christ on the cross becomes a secondary element of the gospel message, if mentioned at all. In fact, a person can be saved without understanding or believing in the substitutionary death of Christ on the cross. How do the minimalists arrive at that conclusion?

Zane Hodges insists that the only book of the Bible that should be used to present the message of good news to the lost is the Gospel of John. To use the death, burial and resurrection as outlined by the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 is to use those verses out of context since that is the gospel to the saved. Likewise, to use passages of scripture from the book of Romans is also to take those verses out of context. The minimalists say that salvation, in the book of Romans, is usually referring to a temporal salvation or being saved from physical death during our mortal lives. Therefore the typical “Romans Road” verses should not be used in a gospel presentation.

The purpose statement in the Gospel of John is:

And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name. (John 20:30-31)

⁶ Ibid. p. 119

⁷ Robert N. Wilkin, “Justification by Faith Alone is an Essential Part of the Gospel,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 18 (Autumn 2005): 13

The minimalists contend that John's Gospel is the only book of the Bible with such a purpose statement. Therefore we should use Jesus' method of evangelism as depicted by John. With this assumption in mind, Zane Hodges writes:

Neither explicitly nor implicitly does the Gospel of John teach that a person must understand the cross to be saved. It just does not teach this. If we say that it does, we are reading something into the text and not reading something out of it!⁸

People are not saved by believing that Jesus died on the cross.⁹

What is the bottom-line gospel message of the minimalist camp? Bob Wilkin sums it up:

There is only one truth that will save: Jesus' guarantee that anyone who believes in Him for eternal life has it.¹⁰

What is the content of faith for this dispensation? According to the traditional "free grace camp," it is to believe in the substitutionary work of Christ on the cross for salvation from sin. According to the minimalist free grace camp, it is to believe Jesus for eternal life.

This is the first issue that needs to be settled in this debate. Once we determine the content of faith for this dispensation, then we must face the issue of progressive revelation as it relates to salvation. Or, has the content of faith changed after the cross?

Has the Content of Faith Changed?

Dr. Ryrie presents the traditional view of the free grace camp with regard to progressive revelation:

The basis of salvation in every age is the death of Christ; the *requirement* for salvation in every age is faith; the *object* of faith in every age is God; the *content* of faith changes in the various dispensations. It is this last point, of course, that distinguishes dispensationalism from covenant theology, but it is not a point to which the charge of teaching two ways of salvation can be attached. It simply recognizes the obvious fact of progressive revelation. When Adam looked upon the coats of skins with which God had clothed him and his wife, he did not see what the believer today sees looking back on the cross of Calvary. And neither did other Old Testament saints see what we can see today.¹¹

The doctrinal statement of Dallas Theological Seminary summarizes it like this:

We believe that according to the "eternal purpose" of God (Eph. 3:11) salvation in the divine reckoning is always "by grace, through faith," and rests upon the shed blood of Christ. We believe that God has always been gracious, regardless of the ruling dispensation, but that man has not at all times been under an administration or

⁸ Zane C. Hodges, "How to Lead People to Christ, Part 1: The Content of Our Message," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 13 (Autumn 2000): 6-7.

⁹ Hodges, "How to Lead a Person to Christ, Part 2," 10.

¹⁰ Robert N. Wilkin, *Confident in Christ* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1999), 10.

¹¹ Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), p. 115.

stewardship of grace as is true in the present dispensation. We believe ... that the principle of faith was prevalent in the lives of all the Old Testament saints. However, we believe that it was historically impossible that they should have had as the conscious object of their faith the incarnate, crucified Son, the Lamb of God (John 1:29), and that it is evident that they did not comprehend as we do that the sacrifices depicted the person and work of Christ. (Article V)

One of the distinctives of classical dispensational theology is that it upholds progressive revelation. In other words, God did not dump every theological aspect of soteriology on Adam and Eve immediately after the fall. In contrast, covenant theology undermines progressive revelation. According to covenant theology, every Old Testament saint had a clear understanding of Isaiah 53. They knew exactly what Messiah would accomplish on the cross. However, if that were really the case, then the covenant theologian would be forced to conclude that Peter was lost when he rebuked Christ for teaching about His impending death at Calvary. The covenant theologian is left with an absurd dilemma. Even before Peter's rebuke, Jesus commissioned His disciples to preach the gospel of the kingdom. Now the covenant theologian ends up with the scenario of lost Peter preaching a gospel message of the death, burial and resurrection of Christ which Peter himself did not believe at that moment in time.

The classic dispensationalist has the perfect solution, since he believes in progressive revelation. Obviously, the content of faith changes after the cross.

How does the minimalist wing of the free grace camp handle progressive revelation? Do they follow the classic dispensational teaching regarding this issue? I'm afraid that they don't. Zane Hodges explains:

Inasmuch as the key figures in John's narrative did believe in Jesus before they understood His atoning death and resurrection, it would have been even more essential for John to state that the content of faith had changed. But of course he does not do this. The simple fact is that the whole Fourth Gospel is designed to show that its readers can get saved the same way as the people who got saved in John's narrative. To say anything other than this is to accept a fallacy. It is to mistakenly suppose that the Fourth Gospel presents the terms of salvation incompletely and inadequately. I sincerely hope no grace person would want to be stuck with a position like that. Let me repeat. Neither explicitly nor implicitly does the Gospel of John teach that a person must understand the cross to be saved. It just does not teach this. If we say that it does, we are reading something into the text and not reading something out of it!¹²

In contrast, classic dispensationalism does teach that the content of faith changed at the cross. Interestingly enough, Zane believes that the content of faith changes also, but not at the cross. Instead, it changed beginning with the ministry of John the Baptist. It was not until John the Baptist revealed who the promised redeemer was that Old Testament saints could believe that it was Jesus who promises eternal life. Up until that time, they simply put their faith in the promised Redeemer. At least, that's how Zane sees it.

¹² Zane C. Hodges, "How to Lead People to Christ, Part 1: The Content of Our Message," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 13 (Autumn 2000): 6-7.

The covenant theologian is stuck in a hopeless quagmire, because he claims that the Old Testament saint has a clear understanding of Messiah dying on the cross. The minimalist view avoids the problem created by covenant theology. Yet, like the covenant theologian, he maintains that the content of faith does not change after the cross. In order to arrive at that conclusion, the minimalist view lowers the bar with regard to the content of faith in this dispensation. The gospel message on both sides of the cross is simply to believe Jesus (or a promised Redeemer) for eternal life.

This is the second issue that needs to be settled in this debate. Did the content of faith change after the cross? Or did it change beginning with the ministry of John the Baptist?

Clarifying the Issues

In my opinion, these are the two main issues that we must deal with as we consider the free grace gospel position. The term “crossless gospel” only seems to muddy the waters. In reality, everyone in this debate believes that the cross is essential for salvation.

Dr. Ryrie, in explaining the classic dispensational view of progressive revelation, began by saying: “The basis of salvation in every age is the death of Christ.” Everyone in the free grace camp believes that. Zane Hodges rightly states that the actions of Jesus on the cross are “indispensable.”¹³ The cross is absolutely essential to all free grace advocates. To imply that it is not, is to misrepresent what the other side actually believes. It only detracts from the real issues.

Gregory Sapaugh did a wonderful job focusing the spotlight on the key issues of this “in house” debate. In recent years, however, it seems like the discussion has been derailed by emotionally charged terminology such as the “crossless gospel.” The term “crossless gospel” is akin to labeling our “free grace movement” as the “no lordship” position.

Certainly, the issue of a clear gospel message engenders much passion. But as someone once said, “let’s keep the main thing, the main thing.” Let’s focus on the real issues rather than wrangle about terminology.

¹³ Hodges, "How to Lead a Person to Christ, Part 1," p. 11