

What Is the Free-Grace Gospel?

By Ken Neff

There Is a Debate Raging in the FG Community

There has been debate raging in the Free Grace (FG) community for several years. And it concerns something surprising: the gospel. In 1999 Zane Hodges gave a two-part message at the GES National Conference entitled, "How to Lead a Person to Christ." Those messages were published in the *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society (JOTGES)* in Autumn 2000 and Spring 2001.

Hodges indicated that the saving message is found in the Fourth Gospel, John (cf. John 20:30-31), with John 3:16 and 6:47 stating that all who merely believe in Jesus have eternal life. According to Hodges, Christ and His promise of eternal life is the only necessary content required to believe at conversion.

In Part 1 Hodges gave his now-famous desert island illustration. He tells of a man who finds a small fragment from the Gospel of John: "But the only readable portions are: 'Jesus therefore answered and said to them' (v 43) and 'Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life' (v 47)." Then he says, "Now suppose that our unsaved man somehow becomes convinced that this person called Jesus can guarantee his eternal future, since He promises everlasting life. In other words, he believes Jesus' words in John 6:47. Is he saved?"

In a very prescient and understated observation he continued:

I suspect that there are some grace people who would say that this man is not saved because he doesn't know enough. For example, he doesn't know that Jesus died for his sins on the cross and rose again the third day. Needless to say, there is a lot more he doesn't know either, such as the doctrine of the Trinity, the eternal Sonship of Jesus, or the doctrine of the virgin birth.

But why is he not saved if he believes the promise of Jesus' words? It is precisely the ability of Jesus to guarantee eternal life that makes Him the Christ in the Johannine sense of that term. Our Lord's exchange with Martha in John 11:25-27 demonstrates this clearly.

He went on to say concerning the purpose statement in John's Gospel (John 20:30-31): "This statement does not affirm the necessity of believing in our Lord's substitutionary atonement. If by the time of the writing of John's Gospel, it was actually necessary to believe this, then it would have been not only simple, but essential, to say so."

In Part 2 of his article on how to lead a person to Christ (*JOTGES*, Spring 2001), Hodges states, “People are not saved by believing that Jesus died on the cross; they are saved by believing in Jesus for eternal life, or eternal salvation.”

However, not all within FG circles found these arguments convincing. Some in the FGA disagree with Hodges’ claim that the saving message has not changed since John’s Gospel. They point to progressive revelation and say that since Calvary and the empty tomb, Jesus’ substitutionary death and bodily resurrection must be included in the gospel message and must be believed for anyone to receive eternal life.

Before he went to be with the Lord in late November of last year, Zane Hodges responded to the charge that he was preaching a crossless gospel. He countered that Hixson and others were proclaiming what he called a “legalistic” gospel. The issue is how much evidence, if any, a person must believe concerning Christ and His works, in order to be born again.

Arguing from 1 Cor 15:1–8, some have supported a progressive concept of the good news. In his recent *Hydra* article (*Grace in Focus*, Sept-Oct 2008), Hodges counters that that particular text indicates eight items are associated with the good news. He writes:

Beyond question, all of these truths are of infinite importance. But Jesus never conditioned eternal life on believing any of them...In fact one could believe all eight of the truths listed above and not yet be born again. Believing *all these truths* is not the same as believing in Jesus for eternal life [emphasis his].

Areas of Agreement and Disagreement

Both sides say that it is necessary to believe in Jesus Christ in order to be saved. The camps disagree, however, on whether this is sufficient or not. Hodges and GES says that anyone who simply believes in Jesus for eternal life has it, regardless of whether he understands and believes how it is that Jesus is able to fulfill this promise.

Some in the FGA say that one must not only believe in Jesus for eternal life, but he must also believe in the deity of Christ, in His death on the cross (understood specifically in terms of substitutionary atonement), and in His bodily resurrection on the third day. Absent these beliefs, a person who believes in Jesus and Him alone for eternal life is on his way to hell according to some in FG circles.

Observations

It Seems Arbitrary to Say That Some, But Not All, of the Good News Must Be Believed. Biblically, the good news (the gospel) addresses different truths concerning Jesus. First Corinthians 15 address eight items and, I guess, Luke 2:10-11 could be used to support a position that His birthplace of Bethlehem is part of the gospel. Additionally in Rom 1:16-17, the result of Christ's work seems to indicated that the gospel refers both to justification (v 16 referring to chapters 3-5) and to sanctification (v 17 referring to chapters 6–8). As a result, the necessity of picking and choosing the four or five or six items from some ten or more as absolute essential requirements for salvation causes one to pose and ponder—"Which ones?"

A Patchwork Content Approach Is Not Convincing. In his response to Zane Hodges' Hydra article, article, Greg Schliesmann suggests that an examination of Scripture reveals what is necessary to be believed in order to be saved ("*Legalism is Not a Very Nice Word,*" *In Defense of the Gospel*, Oct. 15, 2008). He says the following are required and give his Scriptural proofs: (1) Christ's deity (John 3:16; 20:31; 1 John 5:5); (2) Christ's death & resurrection (John 6:51, 54; 1 Cor 1:18b, 21; 15:3-4; Rom 4:24-25; 10:9); (3) Gift by Faith Alone (Gal 2:16; Rom 4:5); and (4) Christ's incarnation (John 1:10-12; 3:14-18; 6:47-51; 20:31; Acts 13:38; 1 John 5:5-6). Schliesmann's essential elements of the Gospel are his required checklist and conditions for initial salvation. For him, nothing less can be the gospel.

In his article, *The Tragedy of the Crossless Gospel Pt. 4* (*Grace Family Journal*), Tom Stegall proposes a different set of essentials, in his case, five: (1) Christ's deity, (2) Christ's humanity, (3) Christ's death for our sins, (4) Christ's resurrection, and (5) salvation by grace through faith alone. J. B. Hixson also has five essentials, (*Getting the Gospel Wrong*, pp. 22, 41, 100-103, etc.) but not the same five. Jonathan Perreault has six essentials. It seems that there is as yet no consensus as to what the essentials are or even how many there are.

Evidence That Can Lead to Saving Faith Is Not the Object of Saving Faith. The "content-of-faith" terminology is, in fact, a misnomer. Faith is only a persuasion. Faith is merely a realization of the truthfulness of a proposition that is proven by evidence. Evidence, therefore, is the basis of faith. Something must convince us that a claim is true (even if it simply the trustworthiness of the person making the claim). The issue in the current Free-Grace Gospel debate concerns what particular evidences concerning Jesus must be believed in order to be saved. The "legalistic-gospel" proponents argue the evidence that must be believed concerns Jesus, His works, and His promise of eternal life—though they have at least four different lists; while

“crossless-gospel” proponents argue it doesn’t really matter what evidence convinces a person, but that anyone who believes in Jesus has eternal life.

Is the Gospel of John Really Outdated? Using the progressive revelation argument, the “legalistic-gospel” advocates conclude post-cross evidence must always be included in the gospel. The resulting implication is that the evangelistic appeals in the Gospel of John are outdated and need refreshing. However, when penning his Gospel many years after Christ’s death and resurrection, John doesn’t place an asterisk anywhere to indicate that the saving message had actually changed since Christ’s time on earth. It seems he understood and, therefore, wrote and taught, an unchanging evangelistic message. On the other hand, in John 7:39 the beloved disciple took the time to clarify Christ’s “rivers-of-living-water” teaching to refer to the future ministry of the Spirit. Does it not seem strange that John takes time to explain a future work of the Spirit as it concerns a pre-glorification event, but fails to inform us concerning a post-glorification change in the actual saving message?

From One Man’s Perspective

I grew up the Mormon Church and before I was born again I believed in Jesus. In fact, I believed in His deity, His virgin birth, His miracles as proof of his deity, His sinless life, His death on the cross for my sins, His burial, His bodily resurrection on the third day, His ascension to heaven, His preparation of a place for His own, and His birth in Bethlehem.

But as Hodges indicated, “one could believe all...of the truths listed above and not yet be born again.” I am proof of that fact.

However, due to the ministry of a good friend and Campus Crusade in my life, I began to reevaluate the faith-works teaching of the Mormon Church. I remember, like it was yesterday, driving my Rambler back to the University on a Sunday evening. Suddenly I realized what my friend had said was true. Jesus alone, without my help, provides eternal life on the basis of faith alone. That evening, I believed in Jesus. I had previously believed many true things about Jesus, but only then did I believe in Jesus, and in Him alone, for eternal life.

Requiring more than what is required is a type a legalism. I believe that is the heart of Hodges’ appeal. The issue is not a check-off list, but a Person. It’s captured in the saying, “You can know all about Him, but not know Him.” Reformed Theology misuses this saying. However, it communicates the reality of the current debate between the “legalistic-gospel” camp and the “crossless-gospel” camp. At least, that is how I see it.