

Released: 14 April 2009

To: Fred Chay, PhD., President Elect, Free Grace Alliance

CC: The Community of Free Grace Advocates Worldwide, *for the public*

From: Fred R. Lybrand, DMin, President, Free Grace Alliance

Re: The GES Gospel (aka - the 'Crossless' or 'Promise-only' Gospel)

Dear Dr. Chay,

Fred, at your request I am finally, and reluctantly, addressing the issue concerning the Grace Evangelical Society (GES) and the 'crossless gospel', so called. I say 'so called' because I would name it the GES Gospel. I am not aware of it being held by anyone, anywhere, in history; it is solely owned and promoted by GES. Of course, I am sure that when most GES folks present the gospel, they include a mention of Christ's death and resurrection. However, when one asks, "What must one believe to be saved?" --- Then the cross and resurrection are clearly unnecessary pieces of information for saving faith and eternal salvation in the GES Gospel view. And as any objective person can see, eventually this line of thinking will invade their presentation of the saving message.

I am aware that you attended a meeting involving a number of folks to attempt to look at the text surrounding (especially) GES and its novel view of the Gospel by which we are eternally saved. I am very thankful that you were invited to attend the meeting, since as you know, in the past we have offered to sponsor such collegial and academic discussions

to no avail. It is my deepest hope that GES will repent of its recent error and return to the Free Grace Movement. Perhaps there is a future discussion to be had, and I remain hopeful; however, I want it to be abundantly clear that the GES Gospel, in its current iteration, is not something I can endorse as legitimate or supportable from the Word of God.

I'm sure they might take exception as to whether or not they have left the Movement, but the fact is that GES is no longer mainstream (if it ever was) regarding those who have been patently 'free grace' throughout history. In particular, traditional and mainstream Free Grace leaders such as Dr. Chafer, Dr. Ryrie, and Dr. Radmacher are all in print as affirming the necessity of faith in the finished work of Christ on the cross regarding one's deliverance from eternal damnation. My suspicion is that many folks involved with the Grace Evangelical Society are simply unaware (as was I) that profound doctrinal shifts in the organization have occurred since 1999, culminating in sweeping doctrinal changes in their Statement (August 2005) and the recent attacks (the Hydra-headed article and the review of JB Hixson's book) against those who disagree with the GES reformulation of The Gospel of Grace.

The one thing I hope that might be acknowledged by those representing the GES Gospel, is that they openly affirm that those of us who believe and teach that the 'cross' is necessary to understand and believe in order to be saved from hell to heaven--- that we are not proclaiming the same gospel from eternal damnation that Zane Hodges and GES affirm. In simpler terms, we should all acknowledge that the GES Reformulation is clearly a different gospel than that which we who are classic Free Grace advocates affirm. I know for my own part, I do not believe the GES Gospel is the gospel by which anyone can be eternally saved. For some time the conversation has been misdirected with the claim that those who advocate the GES Gospel do preach the cross---which I do not doubt

and will address in a moment--- I say misdirected because what they openly preach is not what they insist one must BELIEVE in order to be eternally saved. In time however, if they continue on this present course, I don't believe there is any intellectual reason for them to continue to include the cross, etc., in their gospel presentations.

Furthermore, I hope we might confirm what I have directly read and heard; that in their estimation, anyone who believes differently from GES is not a part of the Free Grace Movement. Isn't it best if this issue is out in the open? In many ways, we are laboring for a definition for the Movement. The Free Grace Movement did not start with GES, though it could end with it. If we leave the mainstream and follow the sincere, but misguided thinking of recent years, we will no longer be a Movement, but will rather star in the inevitable last act of fading away as a Monument.

Please be aware that the words from the Free Grace Alliance Covenant are keenly in focus as I write:

In agreement with these affirmations, we covenant to work together graciously and enthusiastically to advance this Gospel of Grace, and to communicate with a positive and gracious tone toward all others, both inside and outside the Free Grace Alliance.

I am severely hopeful that my tone and the mentioning of individuals is gracious and positive; though there is no realistic way for my own conviction that these friends have left the Free Grace Movement---there is no realistic way it can be heard by them as the act of love I intend it to be. I am genuinely prayerful that those who still remain in GES will take these arguments to heart and reconsider their view on the GES Gospel.

Frankly, this letter is my own testimony. I at one time believed the basic arguments Zane Hodges presents in his articles from 2000 and 2001. Tom Stegall, however, brought the issue to the forefront; and, I was forced to personally think

the issues through more carefully. Many people have complained of Tom's qualifications or tone; however, I really don't see it that way. Tom could have perhaps been more tactful or written in a more soothing way—but this issue is about the truth of the matter, not the style of delivery. In my experience, it is often not how you say it, but what you are really saying that is the problem. The views I share here have not been formed by extended conversations or embracing the arguments of those in this fray; they are purely the result of my own study and reflection. I had casually thumbed through Zane Hodge's articles and not given them close attention. However, after carefully considering this topic, I now confess that I have completely returned to the Classical Free Grace understanding, and with such, I have extracted myself (and my church) from any relationship with GES whatsoever (over a year and a half ago). **Of course, the FGA has NEVER had a relationship with GES.** I personally would look forward to starting a relationship with GES, but only if that society returns to the traditional free grace view it had originally, adjusts its doctrinal statement to reflect the change, and (ideally) joins the FGA as an organization (which GES has consistently refused to consider).

Even as I write these words I notice how grieved I am that such a dogmatic aberration has arisen in our day and age. I have fought hard to avoid this moment, but the future of the Free Grace Movement is in the balance. GES has left the historical distinctives, and in particular, the Gospel; so there is no choice, except to lay out the case and allow the members of the Movement (yea, even history itself) to decide with their allegiances.

You will remember that Dr. Charlie Bing affirmed the same burden in his memo to the FGA Executive Council on 10 June 2008 concerning the FGA Covenant and the drift with GES:

The chief disagreement is about the content of saving faith. Our Affirmation #3 says, “**Faith** is a personal response, apart from our works, whereby we are **persuaded that** the finished work of Jesus Christ has delivered us from condemnation and guaranteed our eternal life.”

GES does not hold that a person today **must believe** “that the finished work of Jesus Christ has delivered us from condemnation and guaranteed our eternal life.” This has been their very explicit and public position, especially in recent newsletters, most clearly May/June 2008 “Scavenger Hunt Salvation without a List.” *To be clear, GES says that a person today does not need to believe in the death of Christ on the cross and in His resurrection from the dead. There are other things they would say a person does not need to believe in, but this is the main issue. The essence of the GES Gospel is that they are promoting believing in Christ’s promise only, which leads rapidly to excluding the Person and Work of Jesus Christ.* [Italics mine]

To my knowledge, no one has ever held this view in the history of Christianity. Dr. Chafer, for example stated—

Preaching the gospel is telling something about Christ and His finished work for them which they are to believe. This the simplest test to be applied to all soul-saving appeals. The Gospel has not been preached until a personal message concerning a crucified and living Saviour has been presented, and in a form which calls for the response of a personal faith. (*Salvation*, p. 101).

Dr. Chafer clearly would not have agreed with the GES Gospel because he had a ‘crucified and living Saviour’ front-and-center in the saving message. Moreover, Dr. Bob Wilkin (the GES Founder and President) did not hold this aberrant view

until recent history (I believe he changed his view around 1999-2000, but it isn't documented to my knowledge)—

The way that leads to life is narrow (Matt. 7:13-14). Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but by Him (John 14:6). Self-righteous people are on the wrong path. They are on the broad way that leads to destruction (Matt. 7:13). Jesus came to save those who know that they are sick and lost and in absolute need of His deliverance (Matt. 9:12-13; Mark 2:17; Luke 5:31-32; 18:9-14). Of course, that is all of us, all of mankind. However, some people are unwilling to own up to the truth. The cross of Christ is a stumbling block to those who think that they are good enough to deserve kingdom entrance. Those who throughout the course of their lives reject the free gift of salvation and refuse to trust in Christ alone will find out that in reality they are sinners, those who “practice lawlessness” (Matt. 7:23). Only then it will be too late.

What would you say if you appeared before God and He said, “Why should I let you into My kingdom?” Matt. 7:22 is the wrong answer. The right answer is, “Lord, I am an unworthy sinner who has placed his complete trust upon what Jesus did for me upon the cross, and He promised that whoever believes in Him has eternal life” (Luke 18:13-14; John 3:16; Rom. 4:5; Eph. 2:8-9; Titus 3:5). [Emphasis mine]

This article was accessed at

<http://www.faithalone.org/news/y1988/88dec3.html>

Dr. Wilkin's ‘right answer’ back in December of 1988 was indeed the right answer; and I'm sure hundreds of thousands of us would happily articulate it this way today. By the way, this is the GES I belonged to and supported in the early days (as you know I have also been a plenary speaker at a GES Conference). Bob Wilkin saw (back then) the cross as a stumbling block to the lost, and specifically said the content of our faith (what we should answer) is “Lord, I am an unworthy sinner who has placed his complete trust upon what Jesus did for me upon the cross, and He promised that whoever believes in Him has eternal life.” A

stumbling block to entrance into the Kingdom means that it is something necessary for that same entrance to happen. Any way you slice it, Wilkin formerly did not believe the GES Gospel; but, he did believe the Classic Free Grace Gospel. Indeed, throughout history it has always been articulated in this way, in one form or another, among those who hold to faith alone in Christ alone.

What Happened?

What happened, indeed? It is pretty simple; someone changed his view and others sought to embrace it. The entirety of this issue comes down to one key individual, a mentor of mine and so many others, Zane Clark Hodges. Zane went to be with the Lord in the latter part of 2008; I and many others on many sides of many issues gathered to pay our last (and lasting) respects to him. Unfortunately, in my hesitant opinion, Zane did not finish well in this area of gospel clarity; which turns out to be ironic, if not tragic, since he was such a great proponent of the doctrine of eternal rewards. Of course, it is God's right alone to judge Zane, and me too for that matter (Rom. 14:10). I'm confident we'll all be together and united in heaven someday.

In the summer of 2008 I contacted Zane about this issue of the GES Gospel, as I was newly appointed to the FGA Executive Council, and the discussion was in the forefront as the Council had issued a statement on the question of the cross and the gospel. I was not a part of that discussion or statement, so I wrote Zane (in response to an email he sent me) and asked for clarification regarding the issue and whether or not he believed the cross must be shared in presenting the gospel. He responded to me, Fred Lybrand, on June 17, 2008:

Hi Fred,

Thanks for your prompt and gracious response.

On the question you asked, I am going to refer you to my articles in JOTGES, issues 25 and 26. I am sorry to say that many people do not seem to have paid attention to exactly what I say there.

If you want clarity on my view, I can't do better than these articles.

Best regards in the Lord,

Zane

I took the summer and worked through his articles and responded with the following on October 4, 2008:

Zane,

I'm sorry I have taking so long to respond (though I'm sure you weren't waiting☺). I have gone back and carefully studied your two articles. So, it is clear to me that your answer to the question I asked you earlier:

Put otherwise, if one does not communicate the cross, has he shared the gospel by which we are saved?

...Is, "Yes." However, one can also obviously share the cross and not really share the gospel by insisting on works, etc., so you might also say, "No."

Therefore, as I look at it, I see my question was a bit loose. Let me try to tweak it a little:

Can one adequately share how to be saved from hell to heaven without mentioning the cross to one who does not know about it?

With this question, your articles tell me that you would say, "Definitely, Yes."

You say in your note below that, “I am sorry to say that many people do not seem to have paid attention to exactly what I say there.” I’m a little stumped on this because my interactions with others tell me that they do *understand* what you are saying, but that they *don’t agree* with what you’re saying. Many others, also, are having a hard time *believing* that you are at least saying that the cross is unessential when expressing saving content; if not also unessential for believing unto being eternally saved.

It seems clear enough in your articles that you believe that the essence of the gospel (in the narrow sense of being delivered forever from future conscious eternal torment) is found in believing the promise Christ makes to give eternal life to the ones who believe Him for it.

Of course, this does not say that you do not believe in the cross, preach the cross, promote the cross, etc. I have absolutely no doubts about your convictions or faithfulness regarding the cross. I do, however, personally remain unconvinced about your view on this matter as especially expressed in your JOTGES articles. There are at least five reasons your argument is not yet compelling to me...and none of my concerns have ever been addressed in any of your writings, or in either of the nights at the Tantons’ over dessert, or in any of the classes (that I can recall) I attended under your instruction; including your most recent ‘hydra’ article.

If you are interested, I’d be glad to share my concerns.

God bless,

Fred (Lybrand)

Zane then responded to me on October 6, 2008:

Hi Fred,

Thanks for your email which was gracious in tone.

Fred, as a matter of policy I do not do email discussions or blogs. They are hardly ever profitable. Person to person is better given the right circumstances.

I also think I have made my case quite adequately in my written materials. I didn't convince MacArthur either!

Take care,

Zane

I responded the same day:

Zane,

Thanks for getting back in touch. Perhaps the right circumstance will present itself someday. I'll assume you weren't lumping me in with MacArthur ☺

All I had hoped to do was share my concerns, none of which you addressed in your article or any of your writing. I'm pretty sure most of us who have carefully studied your articles don't see your case as 'quite adequate'...though I am quite sure I am very willing to be persuaded by you (as I have always demonstrated).

Personally, I'm disheartened that you weren't interested to hear my concerns.

I'll attempt to discuss them with others who might fairly represent your thinking, perhaps they will be able to answer the things (I believe) you failed to address.

God's very best to you,

Fred (Lybrand)

Zane's final correspondence was the next day on October 7, 2008:

Fred,

And the best to you also.

Zane

We never did meet or move any further in the conversation. I hesitatingly document these, but I feel it is important to establish the fact that Zane fully stood by his articles on “How to Lead People to Christ” (JOTGES, Fall 2000, and Spring 2001). He felt like there was nothing else to say and that he had been perfectly clear.

Of course, this heightens the issue, since it means that Zane really meant what he said. I have had a number of individuals say to me that Zane really didn't mean...(fill in the blank here)...but, in fact, he did. Zane meant exactly what he said in the articles, and he meant exactly what he implied as well, as my notes above (which he confirmed) insist.

The Articles: How to Lead People to Christ

The remainders of my thoughts here are largely focused on the key concerns I wanted to discuss with Zane. These are the issues that will go the farthest to convince me that the GES Gospel (i.e., ‘promise only’) is what the Word of God teaches. Of course, by mentioning them I am also asserting that these arguments are the kinds of things that refute those who adhere to the GES Gospel.

The Good

I must confess that Norman Geisler was persuasive when he taught us to mention the good first. What is good about the GES Gospel? Well, my answer is simply that I believe that these folks are good; that is, they are very sincere in what they are attempting to do. All they are aiming for is simplicity with the gospel. They want faith alone to be the means through which one comes to eternal salvation. They want to keep the gospel simple. I wouldn't begin to judge their motives, but I do question their methods; and yes, their final conclusion(s). Some of this fits the drift in our broader Christian sub-culture. Though the GES Gospel is not ecumenical (which is not a bad thing in principle, but so far, it has turned out to normally become anti-scripture in our country's recent history of the past 150-ish years) at its heart, it is in a perfect place to be used that way. For unity's sake (somewhat of a new-ecumenism) we could try reduce faith in Christ to really just having faith of any kind. For example, I remember a friend of our family (a Reform Jew) complimenting a certain door-to-door cult that had been sharing their message in the neighborhood. He said, "Well good for them as long as they really believe it!" There's the rub—at some point we must have a real conversation about WHAT (and WHO?) we actually believe. The following are the things that, if they remain unsatisfactorily unanswered should end the discussion. I can say personally, that unless these objections are answered, I will never be able to take the GES Gospel seriously in any practical or academic discussion.

The GES Gospel is a *promise-only* gospel, but so is every version of a true 'faith alone' understanding. It is the nature and content of the promise believed that matters. The GES Gospel's understanding is that believing in Christ's promise to give eternal life to those who trust Him for it is the exact gospel one must believe for eternal salvation. The GES Gospel clearly holds that it is unnecessary to believe in the death/resurrection of Christ; that is, the Person and Work of Jesus

Christ. I am not saying that the GES Gospel adherents do not believe these things, nor that they fail to say them when they present the gospel (but, in time, why will they include them?); but I am saying that they do not see specific knowledge or awareness as necessary for inclusion as to what one must believe to be eternally saved. Of course, they also now include believing the doctrine of Eternal Security is necessary for true saving faith, but that will need to be the subject of another letter (!).

The Key GES Gospel Refutation Points

1. The Question of History: Who is Free Grace Historically?

This is simply a repeat from what I've mentioned above. However, if your view excludes or denies legitimacy to those who have been the leaders in the movement, then your view is historically invalid (of course, a new movement can start, but it must break with the old one). Dr. Chafer, Dr. Ironside, Dr. Ryrie, and Dr. Radmacher, are all on record as asserting that the cross is an essential part of the content of saving faith. I personally would include many others in the overall history of being Free Grace (probably Spurgeon, for example), but admit it is largely connected to the Brethren Movement and dispensational hermeneutics. Free Grace belongs to those who see the gospel as believing in God's unmerited kindness toward those who believe in the Person and Work of Christ, apart from works. While anyone can see that there could be struggles about the amount of detail or granularity in the content, the basic understanding of faith alone in Christ alone has always been clearer in our era since the days of Luther and Calvin. Those who are not Free Grace are those who deviate from faith in the saving message.

This often is an issue of front-loading or back-loading the gospel with works and various kinds of commitments; or, in this case, with turning the message into little more than ‘love Jesus’ and you’ll make it to heaven.

I have been saying for some time that the continuum runs from Hyper-Lordship (no one but the most committed gets in) to Universalism (everyone gets in, and just for showing up on the planet).

Nonetheless, if a gospel excludes the heroes of the Free Grace history from membership, then it is not a part of the Free Grace Movement; instead, it must be understood as its own Movement, if not simply an aberration or deviation from the center.

No matter their sincerity or good intentions, if the Grace Evangelical Society, as it stands today, accurately represents the Free Grace Movement, then I am not a Free Grace person. However, we all know that the Free Grace Movement predated GES, Zane Hodges, or Bob Wilkin. In the words of Ronald Reagan (adapted); I didn’t leave GES, GES left me. If GES still affirmed what it did when it started, I’m sure I’d still belong.

The current iteration of the GES Gospel means that they have left the tradition of all that can properly be called Free Grace.

2. The Question of THE QUESTION: What is the better question?

In considering the proper question, it is worth noting that Zane’s articles are entitled: “How to Lead People to Christ.” His first part was subtitled: “The Content of Our Message.” In other words, Zane is discussing the content

necessary for someone to believe in order to be eternally saved. The fact is, no matter one's frustrations with how others addressed the issue, the critics of these Zane Hodges articles are correct: Zane asserts that the cross of Christ is unnecessary content for the gospel. His gospel (meaning what one must believe to be saved eternally) is in this regard, crossless (though I personally don't find this title helpful in the discussion). One need only read the articles and be brave enough to admit this fact. Zane also confirmed to me personally that he believed the cross is not a necessary part of the saving message.

After much reflection I want to suggest that we adjust the questions we are asking and discussing. Usually this discussion about the GES Gospel is about a hypothetical situation where someone didn't have time to hear the 'whole message' of the gospel. In this situation, the Questionee is being put on the spot with, "Would God send that person to hell? Can't He save them if they just believe that He's the answer to their eternal need?"

The problem is that folks in theology tend to deal too much in Theory and not in Fact. Theories are basically unproved (and often un-provable), so another word for this would be GUESS. Most theorizing and conjecturing goes beyond what the Word says, and mistakenly forces conclusions, that in turn are used to interpret scripture. So, when we ask things like, "Do unborn babies who die go to heaven?" or "Can a person be saved on his deathbed with only hearing that Jesus will save him if he trusts Him?" —are simply questions that we cannot truly test and measure either scripturally or practically. We just guess...and try to support our guesses with passages and reasoning. Sometimes we find passages and then guess based on them; but, in the end, it's still just a guess.

I don't know if unborn babies who die go to heaven. My wife and I lost our first baby, so this is certainly personal. I do think there is good reason to think they do make it to heaven, but I also know there are reasons they may not. I stop at 'don't know' because the Word of God doesn't address this issue in this way. I do know God is both good and just, so I'll just trust Him.

Here's the question that is relevant to this issue of the GES GOSPEL:

CAN ONE BE SAVED

BY BELIEVING

SOMETHING LESS THAN THE GOSPEL?

Of course, no one can be saved by believing something less than the gospel. Much of the debate has been sidetracked by discussions about the 'minimum' necessary. However, any discussions about the minimum are silly since it is a false premise; there is no such thing as a minimum, just as there is no such thing as a maximum when it comes to the gospel by which we are saved. There is only what must be believed, everything else is superfluous on the issue of saving content. Maybe there is supporting data that can be added in a gospel presentation, but the truth is that there is only what one must believe to be saved; no minimums and no maximums actually exist. If we understand this fact, then the discussions about what one says when presenting the gospel can be separated from what one must believe to be eternally saved. It is a very relevant concern because, in the final analysis, what one needs to believe and what one communicates to the person seeking salvation must constantly seek to match one another. The gospel that saves should be the gospel we communicate. We can communicate more than the gospel, but we must never communicate less. Often

people bring information with them to the conversation, so we may not mention some of those pieces because they already know them; however, our labors are to bring them to clarity so they can believe. This clarity demands we have a presentation that gives the gospel, no more and no less.

3. The Question of John's Gospel: Can we limit discussion of the gospel to only one book of the Bible?

Zane's argument is predicated on the assumption that the Gospel of John is the only biblical book allowed to weigh in on the content of the gospel. He says, "All forms of the gospel that require greater content to faith in Christ than the Gospel of John requires, are flawed." This somewhat takes the words-of-Christ-in-red approach to interpretation to a new level; that is, there are many who think we should only look at the words of Jesus. Of course Dr. Chay, I don't need to instruct you on the flawed nature of not considering the whole counsel of God. I'm confident Zane and GES do not mean to come across that way, but elevating John to be the only book to explain the gospel is, at least, far from yet proved.

One of Zane's arguments in the JOTGES articles is that the Gospel of John is contemporary (or later) with Paul; so, he surmises, that the way John presents the gospel is the way Paul does too. Unfortunately Zane is passing by one simple point—John is accurately recounting the words of Christ as originally spoken. In other words, John is not CHANGING Christ's words to match Paul. Rather, he is giving his strategically arranged focus of what Christ ACTUALLY said. Some (John Neimela) have also argued that John gives no commentary on Christ's words to explain why the gospel has changed with Paul. So, as from silence, John's Gospel is given the preeminence in the arena of arguing for the clearest

evangel. The Synoptics (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), however, don't have this kind of commentary either to explain why the gospel of the kingdom isn't the gospel of Paul. These arguments intrigue scholars, but they simply prove nothing. We still have to use sound hermeneutics and clear thought to understand what's up scripturally. Silence as an argument is usually tantamount to guessing; as it is here.

Despite his placing the Gospel of John in the supreme position, Zane Hodges rather incongruently appeals to Paul when he says, "According to the apostle Paul, God is 'the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus' (Rom. 3:26). Moreover it will be 'at the name of Jesus' every knee shall bow and every tongue confess' (Phil. 2:10)." Why appeal to Paul? In particular, Paul has a much fuller and more defined meaning to the phrase 'faith in Jesus' (just read Romans) than that discussed in John—which means Paul CAN enter the discussion of what it means to trust in Christ. But, if Paul is allowed into the discussion, then Zane's view of John's Gospel is at least watered down, if not straight out mistaken.

Here's another example of this curious Faith-Alone-in-John-Alone viewpoint. Zane says, "The disciples of Jesus were saved without knowledge of the death and resurrection of their Master. However, some people today would say, 'But it's different now that the cross is behind us. Now we have to believe in that as well.' Do we? Where does this idea come from? Certainly not from the Gospel of John."

I [Fred Lybrand] would simply respond with, "So what? So what if it doesn't come from John?" If the teaching is in the Bible, it is still in the Bible. What if this teaching does come from Paul and is spelled out in clear detail (and it is, as I'll mention later)? Many teachings in the Bible are true and validated, but not

mentioned in various books. Esther famously affirms God's sovereignty without ever mentioning the name of God. If the cross is to be included in the content of the saving act of faith, then why can't it be explained in Paul's writings? Why must it have been mentioned by John to be legitimate? Of course, unless one has an agenda he can see that John mentions the cross in clear and full detail. Zane's concern is with the disciples who were saved before the cross; an issue involving the progress of revelation.

In some ways, this argument about the Gospel of John as being the only source of information regarding the content of the saving message is known in logic as an unfalsifiable position. An unfalsifiable position can't be proved false so it can't be proved true. How would one prove the premise false? By showing another book that claims exactly what John claims the way Zane interprets it? Well, no book makes the same case as any other book in the Bible, so there you go—you lose. It is also similar to arguing in a circle. It might go like this, "John is the only place to understand the real content of the gospel. Why? Because John is the only place that was written to spell out the gospel. Why? Because John is where we find the gospel spelled out. Why? Because John says it is."

The case is largely built on extraneous assumptions about the purpose of John, especially as found in John 20:30-31. The debate is hardly concluded, since many think the statement is more local (applies to the immediate context) as John employs in 1 John 5:13.

4. The Question of Method: Can you build a doctrine of the gospel on only one verse?

The most glaring problem for the GES Gospel as explained by Zane Hodges is found in what we might call a One Verse Fallacy. Zane does not simply elevate the Gospel of John above all the books in the Bible concerning the evangelistic message, he elevates one passage above all others. The readable parts are these: “Jesus therefore answered and said to them...Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in Me has eternal life” (John 6:43a & 47, NKJV).

In this scenario, Zane poses a hypothetical (always a mistake...since now we are talking about an all-but-absolute impossibility) situation where a passage of scripture washes onto an island inhabited by one person who knows nothing of Christianity. Zane further postulates that this castaway somehow becomes convinced that this person, Jesus (whoever he is), can guarantee the man on the island’s eternal future. Zane clearly asserts that this person is saved.

As I’ve [Fred Lybrand] studied this hypothetical I have only arrived at one essential observation: “Good thing the right verse washed up on shore!” Now, by this I mean, specifically, that Zane’s theory falls apart if a different verse (or a different translation) from the Gospel of John arrives on shore.

First, let’s clarify what Zane is asserting the ‘content of our message’ really is. Here are four quotes from his article (part 1):

- *If we believe that Jesus is the One who guarantees our eternal destiny, we have believed all we absolutely have to believe in order to be saved.*
- *We are saved by believing in Jesus*
- *When he believes John 6:47 he is believing in Jesus as the Christ.*

- *I am arguing that we need to focus on the core issue in bringing men and women to faith and eternal life. What is that core issue? Very simply it is this: We want people to believe that Jesus guarantees their eternal destiny.*

So, you can see that because the person believed ‘in Him’ he has the guarantee of eternal life according to John 6:47. But the problems only begin here because of two essential things:

1. The verse that washes up on shore must be from the NKJV. All versions based on the NU MSS (NASB, ESV, NIV, NLT, NET, etc.) translate it ***without*** ‘in Me’ in the sentence (the KJV translates it ‘on Me’—which could create other challenges for Zane’s hypothetical scenario). So in virtually all other versions, the verse reads, “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life (ESV).” “Whoever believes what?” our island inhabitant would ask frantically; and, with absolutely no way to find out or figure it out. There is no content for believing if the Majority Text is not at least footnoted (and not faded) on the washed ashore page from John. If any of the popular versions of the English Bible (accept the New King James Version) are used, then the man cannot get saved, according to Hodges’s view. This should be seen as a glaring problem. Why would God allow the most important essential verse explaining the gospel (according to Zane) to have a text-critical problem that destroys all hope for the man on the island? Forgive my tone, but it is a glaring problem that Zane based his WHOLE argument on a DISPUTED VERSE

in the Bible. This isn't an argument from silence, but rather an argument from absence.

2. What if a different verse from the Gospel of John washes ashore? What if John 5:24 is the verse that the marooned man finds? It reads, "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life" (NKJV). It is important to note that the essential phrase 'has eternal life' is also in this verse as well.
 - a. So, our marooned unsaved person can see that he needs to simply do two things to have everlasting life:
 - 1) Hear the words of Christ (we'll assume that this is somehow clear to him as Zane does)
 - 2) Believes in the Father (Him who sent Me/Christ).

Of course, the problem here is that this verse insists that one must believe in the Father, all the while being a verse from the lips of Jesus in the Gospel of John. Clearly if one hears the words of Jesus and believes in the Father, he gets eternal life. But this is quite different than what Zane and the GES Gospel asserts.

What Zane has sought to avoid is unavoidable. Even if you limit the scope of your inquiry to the Gospel of John, you still must think and work out a theology of some type. Anyone can go

through the Gospel of John and realize how many different criteria or conditions are connected with receiving eternal life.

The same phenomenon happens with the whole counsel of God. While he sought to reconcile the various issues concerning the content of the saving message, Zane only moved the problem into a smaller (and inappropriate, in my opinion) pool.

5. The Question of One Gospel: Is the gospel subject to the progress of revelation?

The GES Gospel actually has another ‘good motive’ when it comes to their thinking; they are concerned with the historical confusion over the gospel. On occasion, all theologies that see eternal salvation as requiring “faith alone” can have this complaint leveled against them. The Hyper-Calvinists often comes across this way when they say such curious things as “Not being under the law means we are no longer under the Law as a means of salvation, we are under grace.” Clearly then, they believe that the ‘old gospel’ was obedience to the Law, while the ‘new gospel’ is faith in Christ. We Free Grace folks have also had that accusation thrown our way because it sounds like believing in the Person and Work of Christ could not have happened in the Old Testament; so, obviously (to them) we believe in two gospels.

Honestly, I think the nature of progress in revelation is a clear, defendable, and accurate explanation of what has happened with the gospel. The progressive nature of revelation simply means that God told humankind more as the books of the Bible were written. In the Old Testament we see mention of the Day of the

Lord (or the Kingdom, or pick any topic), and as the New Testament was written, we received even more detail about that Day.

It is the same with The Gospel. We know The Gospel was preached to Abraham in Genesis 12—and, we know this because, in the progress of revelation, Paul tells us so in Galatians 3:8.

Here's the rub with the GES Gospel; they deny the progress of revelation. Rather than understanding that we have always been eternally saved by grace through faith alone, but that the content (how much information and how detailed) of this faith was varied over time. Clearly, Genesis 3:15 gives the basics of the gospel as God promises victory over the serpent's effect by the Messiah's bruising his head.

This misunderstanding shows up in the GES view of the gospel message in John. If one even casually reviews the recent GES literature, he can see that progress of further content/clarity to believe is denied. The idea is that whatever it took content-wise for the Samaritan woman to be saved in John 4, is the same that is required of you and me. The fact of the cross is irrelevant in their understanding; irrelevant, that is, as to the content necessary to believe to be saved. They may preach the cross in their presentations, but there is functionally no need to do so.

This denial of the progress of revelation means that Paul can't add information to the gospel, since the gospel content is the same (exactly) all the way through the Bible. On the surface, I believe this is as silly as it sounds. I don't mean to have a sarcastic or demeaning tone, but it is simply reading theology into the Bible to hold this view. Does anyone really think Abraham believed that JESUS was guaranteeing his eternal destiny in Genesis 12 or 15? If you do, then you are simply guessing. It just isn't in the text.

Frankly, if this part of the GES Gospel view is true, then the devoted Jew of today who reads Habakkuk may just as clearly and easily be saved without any knowledge of Jesus. Of course, this is not the case. The content of what God requires us to believe has changed over time; changed, that is, with expanded information and clarity. The Old Testament gospel, however one labels and develops it, is not the message by which we are saved today; though it is the same in essence. Today we are saved through faith, which is a personal response, apart from our works, whereby we are persuaded that the finished work of Jesus Christ has delivered us from condemnation and guaranteed our eternal life.

Frankly, we didn't have New Testament 'verses' until the 16th century. When the Gospel of John was read in the early church, it was read in its entirety. Clearly the people of that day got it; the Samaritan woman was eternally saved because she believed all she had to at that moment, given what the Lord had revealed. But as clarity and detail grew, what was required in the way of faith for those seeking salvation---the content was expanded. People do have to believe the 'whole' gospel now, the content of saving faith has indeed changed with the progress of revelation; the basic gospel, however, has not changed—we are still saved by God's answer to our eternal sin problem; Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the one who was crucified and raised for our benefit.

6. The Question of the Cross: Is the cross part of the content of saving faith?

This question is most crucial and cuts across many lines of discussion. Many people are busily about telling others to ask Jesus into their hearts. Asking Jesus into one's heart, however, is neither biblical nor useful. It is a fine notion, and of

course the Lord of Glory does indwell the believer; but, asking Him to come in is not the saving message. I'm sure it is used innocently and pre-evangelistically in the providence of God; but in the same way, neither is the GES Gospel of 'believe Jesus guarantees your eternal life' the complete and saving message, though it, too, may be used pre-evangelistically to draw people toward the Lord.

But, is the cross (and for that matter the resurrection) part of the saving message to believe for deliverance from eternal damnation?

[As an aside, let me stress the reality that a conversation about the gospel is challenging when it comes to content. The GES Gospel, however, solves no problems in this domain. Believing 'Jesus is the guarantor of eternal salvation for all who believe Him for it' still has much content. Who is this Jesus? How guaranteed is it? What exactly does eternal mean? Is it really for all, or just for any? Is it believe Him or believe the promise itself? And the list goes on...]

Zane Hodges clearly says the cross is not part of the saving message. In his JOTGES articles he makes the following statements:

- 1. 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. But why is he not saved if he believes the promise of Jesus' words?*
- 2. The simple truth is that Jesus can be believed for eternal salvation apart from any detailed knowledge of what He did to provide it.*

Zane clearly believes and asserts the hypothetical person on the island is saved (why else would he even use the example?), and that this same man knows

nothing of the cross and resurrection. Again, with the One Verse Fallacy, Zane has postulated a scenario to endorse how knowing about the cross is unnecessary for eternal salvation. The second statement is even more glaring, since he is saying detailed knowledge of what Christ did is unnecessary. The second statement of Zane's is even more striking if we remove the word *detailed* (for why does it matter if it is detailed or not?):

3. The simple truth is that Jesus can be believed for eternal salvation apart from any ~~detailed~~ knowledge of what He did to provide it.

Again, why would it matter if it's detailed or not? If Zane Hodges thinks some knowledge of what Jesus did is necessary, it goes against the essence of his argument as found in the two JOTGES articles. If removing the word 'detailed' offers clarity, then let it stand. The GES Gospel believes that Jesus can be believed apart from knowledge of what Christ did on the cross—it doesn't get any simpler than that.

Yet, here is where the apostle Paul weighs in on the issue. Proponents of the GES Gospel may call 'foul' because we should only be getting the gospel content from John's Gospel; however, Paul surely taught and shared the same basic gospel Jesus affirmed. In fact, Paul led far more people to Christ than Christ did Himself.

It is striking to me how 1 Corinthians settles this issue and should end the aberration found in the GES Gospel. But what is more striking is how GES has adjusted its interpretation of 1 Corinthians 15. 1 Corinthians 15 isn't about the gospel of eternal salvation, but rather it is about the sanctification of the already saved. Of course, some hold that it refers to both; but neither Zane Hodges nor Bob Wilkin is comfortable with either understanding. For the GES Gospel, if the

gospel by which we are eternally saved is in view in 1 Cor 15, then the cross and resurrection are necessarily a part of the content---which they deny.

I know it is easy for me to shout out the accusation of ‘eisegesis’—but I simply challenge anyone to study the issue—it is blatantly clear that their view of 1 Corinthians 15 shifted to match the GES Gospel (for Zane this may have been in the 1980s, and for Bob Wilkin, the late 1990s, I think) ---it would be helpful for someone to document this; however, we know Bob Wilkin’s view changed from the December 1988 reference above. Bob has changed many of his views over time; most notably is his view of repentance, which now rejects his own doctoral dissertation on the subject. Of course, everyone tends to change over time; but leaving a traditional and orthodox understanding of Free Grace is difficult to overlook. The real implication here is that the GES Gospel is so unique in history that it is not unreasonable for those to hold to it to assume no one has had the ‘real’ gospel in hand until the later part of the 20th Century).

The more curious thing to me is not that they are re-thinking 1 Corinthians 15, but that they have ignored the most compelling passage: 1 Corinthians 1:16-24:

“(I did baptize also the household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) For Christ did not send me to baptize **but to preach the gospel**, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, **lest the Cross of Christ be emptied of its power**. For **the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing**, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.’ Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God **through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe**. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, **but we preach Christ crucified, a**

stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” (1 Cor. 1:16-24, ESV) [Emphasis mine]

I’m not going to elaborate much on this passage, rather I think everyone should read it carefully the 100+ times I have since this issue came across my life. The key thing to note is that Paul is telling the reader that the gospel and the ‘word of the cross’ and the ‘folly of what we preach’ are all clearly connected together regarding the salvation of the lost. In particular, this message is seen as a ‘stumbling block to the Jews’ and ‘folly to the Gentiles’. How clear does Paul have to be? It is through the ‘folly’ of what is preached to save those who believe (what was preached). And, exactly what was that message preached? The answer is CHRIST CRUCIFIED. This is clearly the message of salvation Paul was delivering by the time he was writing 1 Corinthians. Perhaps he had been preaching it all along. Perhaps it had become all the more clear as God instructed him. The truth is that this is where it begins for us, that is, for our eternal salvation. This passage is not about sanctification, though the GES Gospel NEEDS it to be. So far they have not addressed this passage, no doubt for obvious reasons. It will take a lot of work to make it appear to say something other than what it says. The message Paul preached was the message of the cross, and it was the message through which those who believed it were saved, and the message through which others stumbled. Moreover, it was considered basic (milk) truth rather than advanced (meat) doctrine (see 1 Cor. 2:2 and 3:2).

Nelson’s New Illustrated Bible Commentary (edited by Earl Radmacher, Ron Allen, and Wayne House) puts it well concerning 1 Corinthians 1:18:

*The message of the cross is the gospel, the Good News about Christ's death and resurrection for our sins. The gospel penetrates to the core of self-centeredness. For those who exalt self, the message sounds absurd. But for those who bow humbly in faith, it becomes the **power** that is able to snatch them from death and impart eternal life. No wonder Paul put such confidence in this message (Rom. 1:16).*

Obviously these Free Grace Editors and contributing writers see this passage exactly as it is; it is the gospel. It is the means of imparting eternal life to those who humbly bow in faith to the Good News about Christ's death and resurrection for our sins. Paul clearly saw the cross as at least a part of the content of saving faith. It is for those who believe the gospel who are saved. It is certain that that Zane Hodges revered the cross of Christ, but it is also equally certain that his view of the gospel did not include it as part of the saving message. The GES Gospel is not the gospel Paul preached, and it is likely that their dismissal of any text outside of John's Gospel obscures this fact for them. Jesus said He was the answer to our eternal sin problem, while Paul said that Christ's work on our behalf completed the message—the message of the cross, which he proclaimed and defended tirelessly to the glory of God. We must stay on message if we are to see others believe unto eternal salvation.

7. The Question of the Cross in John: Is the cross neither explicit nor implicit?

The question of the cross in the Gospel of John is a lesser issue, except that Zane makes it a strategic point in his view of the content of our message. In particular

he insists that John does not connect the cross to eternal salvation (so we shouldn't either). He says specifically:

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!

First, let me observe that even if Zane is correct here, it is a perfectly irrelevant point. It sounds like an argument because of his assumptions regarding faith-alone-in-John-alone. He further goes to great lengths to point out that when the apostles were saved they did not understand the cross either. Again, so what? Unless one has a prior commitment to the inability or unwillingness of God to add more content to the saving message, then he wouldn't make such an observation an issue. That the apostles trusted in Christ before the cross, and we trust in Christ knowing the cross, offers no issue; we are all saved by grace through faith alone. The apostles could not have included the cross in their act of faith because it hadn't yet become an established fact of history. In Zane's view why would the Gospel of John itself be necessary? If people were saved before Christ's appearance on earth, why add the information that He is 'the guarantor of eternal life'—words that never occur in the Old Testament? Again, since Zane denies the progress of revelation he can only see the gospel with what we might call John-colored glasses.

Is it true that understanding the cross for eternal salvation is neither explicit nor implicit in the Gospel of John? Of course, the word 'understand' is a bit misguided since the true nature of the debate is around what is to be believed. Now, since one must understand in order to believe, it is not unfair to say that

understanding is necessary; though staying true to the issue, considering what one must believe is far more pristine. First, consider a couple of strategic verses from John's Gospel:

4. *"Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life." (John 6:47, ESV) [Majority Text adds 'in Me' after believes]*

5. *"I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh." The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink." (John 6:48-55, ESV)*

The commentaries are quite consistent in seeing these words of Christ as referring to the benefits of his death as appropriated by faith. *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Commentary* (edited by Earl Radmacher, Ron Allen, and Wayne House) comments as follows:

6:53–54 Christ complicates the situation further by adding **unless you ... drink His blood**. The Jews were forbidden to drink blood (Lev. 7:26, 27) and this additional statement must have added insult to injury. However, the Jews misunderstood. Lev. 17:11 clearly states that life is in the blood. Accepting the sacrifice of the body and blood of Christ is the basis for eternal life.

6:53–58 Eats my flesh and drinks my blood is not a reference to the Lord’s table, which He would institute a year later. For one thing, Christ has made abundantly clear in this context that eternal life is gained by believing (vv. 29, 35, 40, 47). These verses are teaching that the benefits of Christ’s death must be appropriated by each person. Christ has made explicitly clear that such appropriation is by faith.

As these references display, it is hard to imagine accepting the sacrifice of the body and blood of Christ without knowing about it. The faith of v. 47 can easily be argued to include the information in vv. 48 -58. I only mention this because it is at least implicit that the content of belief includes the knowledge, if not benefit, of Christ’s death. Jesus attacks the issue of faith from many angles, but in this context He is offering a very direct reference to His death. Zane’s claim that the cross is not even implicit is at least challenged by this passage; and most ironically, this allusion to the cross occurs in the immediate context of Zane’s famous man-on-an-island verse.

Next consider John 3:14-16:

“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”
(John 3:14-16, ESV)

Clearly the Son of Man being ‘lifted up’ is a reference connecting the cross to the healing event recorded in Numbers 21. It is at least implicit here that that the

‘him’ to believe in (v. 14) is the one who is lifted up. The listener (and later the reader especially) is instructed to believe in the crucified Son of Man. It is readily arguable, and at least implicit, that the cross is necessary information for saving faith according to this passage. Again, this is especially true if this passage is the one that washes up on the fabled island.

Finally, notice John 20:30-31:

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

Since the Gospel of John is an entire letter, which would have been read as a whole, it is obvious that the events preceding these verses are in the reader’s mind. In other words, the cross is clearly in the context of this statement by John. The cross, resurrection, etc. (also signs Christ performed) are also clearly in the full understanding of what ‘Jesus is the Christ’ would mean to the audience of the Gospel. It is at this point that ‘believing’ you have life in His name, at least implicitly, means that the whole of the events in John are definitive as to the one in whom faith is to be placed. Indeed, if John is referencing what he has written (even the immediate events), then faith in the cross and resurrection are all but explicit in this passage.

Conclusion

Letters, like books, are often abandoned rather than finished. I remain with about 8 more pages of comments I would like to make regarding the questions I have in reference to Zane Hodges’s articles on the content of saving faith and leading others to Christ. Nonetheless, I have said enough.

My essential thought is that though I would have preferred to continue to ignore the GES Gospel issue, the future of the Free Grace Movement demands a response. I am Free Grace and have been so for over 27 consecutive years. I was a faithful member of GES and avid supporter of Zane Hodges. Unfortunately, the traditional Free Grace Movement has been abandoned by GES with the advent of the GES Gospel. GES is not the Free Grace Movement because the Movement dates back through history and includes the Chafers and Ryries and Radmachers of our past and future. Anyone who excludes these champions of Grace by denying their understanding of the gospel as including the Cross of Christ, has by default, excluded themselves from being in the Movement of Free Grace.

I call on all Free Gracers everywhere to join ranks and hold to the essentials. When Earl Radmacher, Charlie Bing, Elliot Johnson, Phil Congdon, and I met to formulate the first draft of the [FGA Covenant](#), it was with this historical understanding, and a heartfelt desire to graciously include as many as we could in the conversation about Grace, that led us onward.

If I have violated our commitment to be gracious, I am profoundly sorry, since I went to great lengths to avoid doing so. Also, I know we committed to ‘advance this Gospel of Grace’ as part of our covenant to one another. The GES Gospel is a change in the very definition of the Gospel of Grace that violates our own FGA Covenant when it states,

Faith is a personal response, apart from our works, whereby we are persuaded that the finished work of Jesus Christ has delivered us from condemnation and guaranteed our eternal life.

I was there when we formed these words together, knowing that the death and resurrection of the Savior was clearly among our concerns. I also know that it was Larry Moyer's counsel to us that also contributed to this emphasis. In any event, believing in the finished work of Christ clearly is not the same as the GES Gospel's notion of the gospel being nothing except 'believing that He can guarantee one's eternal life'. As the GES Gospel advocates point out—Jesus made this promise before He died, which means He made the promise before His work was finished. To believe the GES Gospel is to deny the Classical Free Grace understanding of the gospel through which we are eternally saved.

I am pleading with all who read this to return to the Classical Free Grace view if you have left us, or to get more practically involved if you are with us. Also, feel free to distribute this far-and-wide. Bruce Abercrombie gives a nice summary of where we are on the GES Gospel:

In the early 21st century, Zane Hodges and Robert Wilkin departed from this understanding and represented saving faith as simply trusting in the promise of eternal life offered by Jesus. They suggest the older Free Grace view requires belief in a somewhat arbitrary collection of facts about Jesus. Free Grace opponents of this revision have called the view a "crossless or contentless gospel" and a "deity-less gospel" and argue that such a view leaves the Gospel devoid of content and amounting to a mere promise of eternal life rather than a divine Jesus and his work to reconcile sinners to God. Hodges and Wilkin's position remains the dominant view in the Grace Evangelical Society, but it has been largely rejected or ignored by the rest of the Free Grace community. See at: <http://knol.google.com/k/bruce-abercrombie/free-grace-theology/3fhdd98lbrwag/2#>

I close by repeating the essential question in this whole matter:

CAN ONE BE SAVED
BY BELIEVING
SOMETHING LESS THAN THE GOSPEL?

Grace and Truth,

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