

Zane Hodges and Theological Legalism

by Bob Nyberg

Zane Hodges recently wrote an article entitled *The Hydra's Other Head: Theological Legalism*. In the article, he states that some adherents of theological legalism use I Cor. 15:1-8 as a text summarizing Paul's Gospel to the unsaved. Who might those theologians be? While not specifically stated in the article, Zane's so-called theological legalists would include Bible scholars such as Charles Ryrie and Robert Lightner. In fact, most conservative dispensational commentators take the position that I Cor. 15:1-8 is the gospel to the unsaved. In contrast, Zane Hodges does not believe that I Cor. 15:1-8 is the gospel we preach to the lost. Zane's position is that in I Cor. 15, Paul is presenting a gospel of sanctification for the saved, not a gospel of salvation for the unsaved.

Zane also states:

Theological legalism seeks to co-opt Free Grace theology. Indeed, it masquerades as this kind of theology. But this claim is false.

In other words, according to Zane, men such as Charles Ryrie and Robert Lightner do not teach Free Grace theology. Since they taught that I Cor. 15:1-8 is Paul's summary of the gospel to the unsaved, these Bible scholars could not be Free Grace theologians. Zane has narrowed down the definition of Free Grace theology to **ONLY** those who hold to his concept of the gospel which is "believing in Jesus for eternal life." According to Zane's limited definition of Free Grace theology, anyone who teaches that a person must believe that Jesus died on the cross for their sins is a promoter of Theological Legalism and does not teach Free Grace theology. In other words, Free Grace theology is the sole possession of Zane Hodges, Bob Wilkin and the Grace Evangelical Society. Anyone who does not buy in to their minimalist (aka Crossless) gospel, cannot be a Free Grace advocate.

Wikipedia has a broader definition of Free Grace theology:

Free Grace theology refers to a distinct view of Christian topics, such as faith, repentance, assurance of salvation, and perseverance, that is tied to dispensationalism. Two organizations that promote it are the Grace Evangelical Society (GES), and the Free Grace Alliance (FGA).

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Free_Grace_theology

In this last year, the Free Grace Alliance has made it clear that they do not hold to the minimalist gospel that is being promoted by the Grace Evangelical Society. The Executive Director of FGA, Dr. J. B. Hixson, recently published the book *Getting the Gospel Wrong — The*

Evangelical Crisis No One is Talking About. In fact, Zane's article appears to be a rebuttal to the book in which Dr. Hixson argues against Zane's minimalist gospel. Dr. Hixson writes:

In recent years, some theologians have departed from the biblical view of the gospel by suggesting that one can believe in Jesus for eternal life without explicit knowledge that He died and rose again for one's sins. For these theologians, knowledge of Christ's death and resurrection as a payment for one's sins is optional as part of the content of saving faith.

The view that one can believe in Jesus for eternal life without knowing that He died and rose again has been variously termed the "crossless gospel," the "promise-only gospel," the "contentless gospel," the "minimalist gospel," and the "refined gospel." This view is being propagated primarily by the Grace Evangelical Society and such notable theological scholars as Zane Hodges, Bob Wilkin and John Niemela, to name a few. Their self-labeled view of the gospel is termed the "refined view," indicating that the accepted view of the gospel throughout two thousand years of church history has been incorrect and that they have now provided a long-overdue corrective. Hodges refers to the traditional view of the gospel, as including the death and resurrection of Christ, as "flawed." Cf. Zane C. Hodges, "How to Lead People to Christ, Pt," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 14 (Spring 2001): 9–18. Hodges elsewhere states, "The simple truth is that Jesus can be believed for eternal salvation *apart from any detailed knowledge of what He did to provide it.*" *Ibid.*, p. 12. See also Zane C. Hodges, "How to Lead People to Christ, Pt," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 13 (Autumn 2000): 3–12, emphasis added.

For Hodges and others who hold this view, the gospel is limited to: "Belief in Jesus Christ as the guarantee of eternal life." Hodges writes, "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." Hodges, "How to Lead People to Christ, Pt," 10. According to Hodges, details such as who Jesus is (i.e. the Son of God) and His work on the cross are not relevant to the precise content of saving faith. To be clear, proponents of this view believe Christ died and rose again; *they just do not believe one has to believe in the death and resurrection of Christ to be saved.*

The President of FGA, Charlie Bing, wrote:

Since this is not a peripheral issue, there is a strong feeling among the FGA Executive Council that we affirm the necessity of believing in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for salvation. That is the message we want to work together to advance in the world.

I submit that Free Grace theology is the view of traditional dispensational soteriology. Men such as Charles Ryrie and Robert Lightner did not co-opt Free Grace theology. In fact, their view of I Cor. 15 is the normal teaching of Free Grace theology. In reality, Zane Hodges, Bob Wilkin and the Grace Evangelical Society have drifted from the orthodox teaching of traditional dispensational soteriology which **IS** the essence of Free Grace Theology.