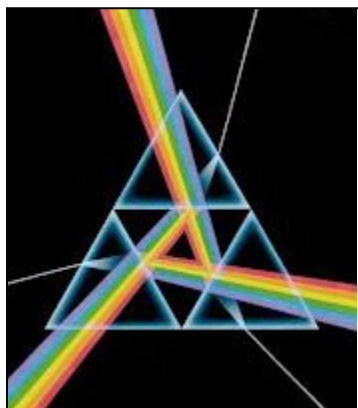


Sunday, October 31, 2010

The Strange Beliefs of Stegall's System



Introduction

Last week Bob Wilkin posted his review of Tom Stegall's new book *The Gospel of the Christ*. While I don't agree with the Grace Evangelical Society (GES) gospel espoused by Wilkin, he does make some good points in his critique of Stegall's position. We must not

forget Paul's command to "examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good" (1 Thess. 5:21). In discussing the "MAIN WEAKNESSES OF THE WORK", Wilkin writes: "I believe the underlying weakness that causes all the rest is that Stegall is blinded by tradition...Like a five-point Calvinist, he thinks his tradition is right and he seeks ways to prove his tradition (from tradition, theology, logic, and Scripture), rather than searching the Scriptures and letting them speak for themselves."¹

After studying Stegall's groundless gospel (his teaching that the burial of Christ is not really part of the gospel) for several years now, I can't help but agree with Wilkin's assessment! In fact, before I ever read Wilkin's review, I had used the Calvinism comparison myself in describing the main weakness of Stegall's position to others. Stegall's interpretation of the Scriptures is like looking at the Bible through rose colored stained glass windows and seeing everything in red.

While Stegall's position has a veneer² of biblical orthodoxy, the following key beliefs appear to be the real basis for his redefinition of the gospel:³

12 Key Beliefs of Stegall's System

KEY BELIEF #1: TRIANGLES – In the preface of his book Stegall has a [picture](#) of a large upward pointing triangle containing a smaller downward pointing triangle. The smaller triangle has arrows on each side which represent "virtual mirror reflections".⁴ These triangles are said to picture the "threefold basis"⁵ of the groundless gospel "in an amazing triangular testimony".⁶ This geometric symbol [appears](#) later in the book as well.⁷ Stegall's triangle supposedly depicts the primary basis of the groundless gospel but strangely resembles [the Masonic symbol for deity](#)⁸ (on the [Masonic Hall](#) in Sheffield, England) – a *false* deity whose secret name is Jahbulon.⁹ (Freemasonry is *not* a Christian organization – it is a pagan religion rooted in Gnosticism.)¹⁰ Amazingly, the pyramid with an upside down triangle is also [a trademark of the Klu Klux Klan](#) (notice how the two triangles form [three interlocking K's](#)), and is often displayed on the robes of [The Exalted Cyclops](#). The [Klu Klux Klan](#) (KKK) is a secret society of white supremacists and is classified as a hate group! More recently, the pyramid shaped symbol has come to be associated with the [The Legend of Zelda](#) video game and the Triforce. According to the legend, the Triforce is a triangular sacred relic made up of three smaller triangles known as the Triforce of Wisdom, the Triforce of Power, and the Triforce of Courage. These smaller triangles are said to represent the essences of three golden goddesses. The pyramid shaped symbol pictured in Stegall's book does indeed have "an amazing triangular testimony", but probably not the one Stegall intended. In reality, the Triforce symbol is a testimony to the

wisdom of the world (1 Cor. 1:18-29). It functions as a warning label highlighting the danger of the groundless gospel!

Some might argue that the Triforce symbol can still be used to the glory of God in spite of its pagan roots and associations (similar to the altar "TO AN UNKNOWN GOD" in Acts 17:22-34). But this thinking misses the point because it does *not* glorify God to redefine the gospel – and this is exactly what Stegall is trying to do with the "amazing triangular testimony" of his triangle. Notice what he says: "The years ahead will require **us** to define the *sine qua non* of the gospel".¹¹ Apparently Stegall does not realize that **God** has already defined the gospel *for us* (see 1 Cor. 15:1ff)!

Stegall may be sincere, but he is sincerely wrong. The Bible says that Christians must "beware" (Col. 2:8, NKJV, Greek *blepete*) of mixing deceptive philosophies and worldly principles with the teachings of Christ. The apostle Paul warns: "*See to it [or beware] that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ*" (Col. 2:8; cf. 2 Cor. 11:3-4, 14, NKJV). Greek scholar Marvin Vincent notes that "the elementary principles of the world" (or "rudimentary teachings", Col. 2:8, KJV) includes "pagan symbolic mysteries" – like the Gnostic/Masonic/Klu Klux Klan/Triforce triangle.¹² A. T. Robertson concludes: "The Gnostics were measuring Christ by their philosophy as many men are doing today. They have it backwards."¹³

Not surprisingly, Stegall's triangle creates more problems than it solves.¹⁴ Notice what he says when he introduces it in the preface of his book. He writes: "As a reader, it will also be helpful for

you to understand at the outset what the thesis of this book is based upon. The contents of saving faith articulated in this book have not been chosen arbitrarily. In the last few years, as I prayerfully and carefully studied each passage containing the various forms of the word 'gospel,' as well as studying the Johannine writings and many other individual, soteriologically significant passages, the consistency and coherence of God's Word became evident and overwhelming. The Lord has not been vague about what He requires us to believe in order to be born again. Nor has He hidden it from us. This is not a matter of the secret things belonging only to the Lord in contrast to the truths He has revealed (Deut. 29:29). He has provided abundant revelatory testimony to mankind in order to answer the question of what we must believe [that apparently takes years to figure out!]. He has provided a cord of at least three strands in testifying to the contents of saving faith."¹⁵

This statement by Stegall reveals several things: (1) If indeed the "Lord has not been vague about what He requires us to believe in order to be born again. Nor has He hidden it from us" – then why did it take Stegall "years" of prayerful and careful study before "the consistency and coherence of God's Word became evident"! Are the contents of saving faith really that hard to understand and that difficult to figure out? This is a glaring problem that only highlights the [arcane](#) nature of Stegall's position. No wonder Wilkin incredulously asks: "DOES GOD HIDE THE SAVING MESSAGE IN A *SYNTHESIS*?"¹⁶ (2) How were the "many other individual, soteriologically significant passages" chosen? Stegall never explains – in fact, he suggests that this is a question which is never specifically answered in the Bible!¹⁷ Stegall wants us to believe that his method of selection is not a case of the theological tail wagging the hermeneutical dog, but since he never explains his selection process, how is the reader to know? Wilkin is correct to conclude that such tactics on the part of groundless gospel advocates are nothing more than

"arbitrary dogmatism".¹⁸ (3) Notice that there is a hint of uncertainty or ambiguity as to the basic structure of the triangle - for Stegall likens it to a cord of "at least three strands". So are there three strands or more than three strands? What if there are actually four strands and the fourth strand fundamentally alters the interpretation of the first three strands and highlights the error of Stegall's no-burial gospel (cf. 1 Cor. 15:4)? It is telling that Stegall cannot even say with certainty that his geometric symbol is completely accurate.

The simple fact of the matter is that Stegall's triangle is his own invention. It's his unique system of theology. It's the lens through which he understands the Scriptures. It's the window through which he interprets the Bible. Calvinism has five points, the Triforce triangle has three points (in reality, Stegall's entire system has at least 12 key points or beliefs). While the two paradigms are quite different they do share at least one thing in common: both are man-made systems imposed upon the Bible.

KEY BELIEF #2: VIRTUAL MIRROR REFLECTIONS – In explaining his strange triangle Stegall says: "All three lines of evidence function as virtual mirror reflections of one another".¹⁹ Apparently the *sine qua non* of the gospel is bouncing around inside the triangle somewhere and Stegall has found the secret to harnessing its power.²⁰ The triangle of power and the virtual mirror reflections go together. They are the two most important keys of the groundless gospel. Why else would Stegall highlight them in the very preface of his book?

Actually, the "virtual mirror reflections" highlight a design flaw in the Triforce triangle. If Stegall were intellectually honest he would have to admit that "**The Contents of the Gospel of Christ**"²¹ (the left side of the triangle) *include* Christ's burial (1 Cor. 15:4).²² Thus, this gospel truth should

be reflected to the other two sides of the triangle – *but it is not*. Upon close examination it becomes clear that Stegall is using the "amazing triangular testimony" and "virtual mirror reflections" of his triangle not to define the biblical gospel, but instead to redefine it.

KEY BELIEF #3: UNANSWERED THEOLOGICAL QUESTIONS – Under the heading "**The Contents of the Saving Gospel**,"²³ Stegall attempts to explain why "*The [Groundless] Gospel's Content is Not Arbitrary*".²⁴ Stegall once again draws the reader's attention to a [picture](#) of his [enigmatic](#) triangle as he discusses one of its [constituent](#) parts: "**Individual Salvation Passages & The Grounds of Redemption**"²⁵ (which he defines as "Christ's deity, humanity, substitutionary death, and bodily resurrection...in addition to salvation through faith apart from works"²⁶ – but noticeably excluding Christ's burial and resurrection appearances). Then Stegall makes the most amazing statement. He says, "But this raises an important **theological question**. Why would God require us to believe only those truths about Christ that provide the *grounds* of our eternal salvation rather than all other Christological and soteriological truths [such as Christ's burial and resurrection appearances – truths which Stegall argues do not provide the grounds of our eternal salvation]? **The reason for this is nowhere stated specifically in Scripture, but the answer appears to be wrapped up in the mediatorial role of Jesus Christ** (John 14:6; 1 Tim. 2:3-6)."²⁷ Notice Stegall just admitted that one of the constituent parts of his triangle is based on a theological question/premise that is nowhere specifically answered/stated in the Bible! Apparently even the triangle of power cannot solve this mystery.

KEY BELIEF #4: SYMMETRICAL LITERARY MARKERS – Stegall believes that the twice repeated phrase "according to the Scriptures" in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 "provides symmetrical literary markers in the passage that distinguish the actual *content* of the gospel from the *evidences* for

that gospel."²⁸ Notice that even though Stegall uses the double occurrence of the phrase "according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3, 4) as the key to decode the cipher of his mini-gospel he doesn't even include these two phrases in his gospel!²⁹ In his view they merely mark out the content of the gospel but they are not included in that content themselves. Is it any wonder that a false gospel doesn't include the references to "the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3, 4)? It is truly a tragedy that Stegall exploits the Scriptures in this way. In contrast to Stegall's reductionist reasoning, notice what John Piper has to say about the twice repeated phrase "according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3, 4). Under the heading "**6 Aspects of the Gospel Without Which There Is No Gospel**," Piper declares: "The gospel was *planned* by God beforehand (verses 3, 4: 'according to the scriptures')...Now, why is that good news? Because I'm arguing this is an essential part of the gospel. You strip away 'according to Scriptures' – [so as to say] 'there was no plan here'...well what was it if it wasn't a plan? Historical vagaries, just something slipped up here, something went wrong here...that's not gospel."³⁰

KEY BELIEF #5: RANDOM NUMERICAL FREQUENCY – In his book Stegall presents another unique method of interpretation in his continued attempt to redefine the gospel. His new method of interpretation borders on numerology by attaching "essential" gospel status to words based on the number of times they are mentioned in the New Testament. Conversely, he attaches no such "essential" gospel status to words that appear less frequently. Under the heading "*The Frequency of Christ's Death & Resurrection*" Stegall declares: "if Christ's burial and appearances are truly elements of the gospel of our salvation, and therefore essential to saving faith, then there is no adequate explanation to account for the fact that the death and resurrection **most frequently** appear together in the New Testament without any mention of the burial and appearances."³¹ Stegall then goes on to list a random selection of Scriptures

referencing Christ's death and resurrection. Stegall's method of interpretation is flawed not because he is noting the number of times certain words occur in the New Testament, but because he is using numerical frequency to supposedly divine the essential and non-essential elements of the gospel without biblical grounds. It is telling that none of the passages Stegall lists even claim to declare the content of Paul's gospel! Furthermore, Stegall's reductionist reasoning contains its own refutation. When consistently applied, such a hermeneutic ultimately leads one to conclude that Christ's resurrection is a non-essential element of saving faith because it is not mentioned as frequently as Christ's death! In other words, based on Stegall's reasoning a misguided interpreter could conclude that the death of Christ is the one key work most frequently emphasized throughout Scripture as the one truth necessary for salvation, not His resurrection. This unbiblical conclusion is more easily arrived at when the passage in 1 Corinthians 15 is selectively omitted, as Stegall has done in his compilation(s) of Scripture.³²

KEY BELIEF #6: MISTRANSLATION OF THE BIBLE – Stegall believes he has found support for his partial gospel in a somewhat obscure footnote from Daniel Wallace's textbook *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*. In the footnote Wallace makes the following notation regarding the characteristics of conjunctions, saying: "Although the two elements [which are connected by a coordinating conjunction] might be equal *syntactically*, there is often a *semantic* notion of subordination. For example, on the surface 'I went to the store *and* I bought bread' involves two coordinate clauses joined by *and*. But on a 'deep structure' level, it is evident that coordinate ideas are not involved: 'I went to the store *in order that* I might buy bread.'...Paratactic structure (i.e., when whole clauses are joined) may or may not reflect the true semantic relationship."³³ In short, Wallace is saying that coordinating conjunctions like *kai* ("and") can often have a notion of subordination on a deep structure level and can thus be translated as "in order that" or "in order

to". The first thing to notice is that even *if* this was the sense of two of the three *kai* conjunctions in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5, it still doesn't remove Christ's burial and appearances from the content of the gospel. But there are several reasons to conclude that Wallace's footnote does *not* apply to 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 and cannot be used to support Stegall's partial gospel interpretation of the passage. I have already discussed all these reasons at length in my articles "Getting the Gospel Right" ([Part 1](#) & [Part 2](#)), but one of these reasons is particularly relevant to the discussion here. Namely, Wallace's footnote cannot be used to support a partial gospel interpretation of 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 because such a connection leads to a mistranslation of the passage. This is an important consideration and even Wallace advises the exegete to: "Test each option with an interpretive translation in determining the best one."³⁴ Based on Wallace's footnote (which points out that on a "deep structure" level the coordinating conjunction "and" can often be translated as "in order that" or "in order to") Stegall concludes: "As this relates to 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 we could say that just as someone would not bury a living person, so the Lord's burial (v. 4a) was dependent upon Him dying first (v. 3b). And just as a person could not be seen by others unless he arose from the dead, so the Lord's post-resurrection appearances (v. 5a) were dependent upon Him rising from the dead first (v. 4b). In this respect, the burial and appearances are clearly seen to be semantically subordinate to the two main clauses in the passage. The claim that 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 contains a 'golden chain' of elements that *must be* of equal theological weight and that *must* all be elements of the saving gospel, is clearly seen to be unfounded."³⁵ The problem with Stegall's reasoning is that it is based on an unstated mistranslation of the passage. Stegall implicitly is saying that 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 should read as follows: "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, *in order that He might be buried*, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, *in order that He might appear* to Cephas, then to the

twelve." However, if such a translation is correct and conveys the intended meaning of the passage, why do no versions of the Bible translate 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 the way Stegall has suggested? (Even Wallace in his [NET BIBLE](#) doesn't translate the passage the way Stegall has suggested.) That Stegall must rewrite the Bible to support his groundless gospel is a glaring problem! Such practices are characteristic of cults such as the Jehovah's Witnesses and their *New World Translation* but should have no place in the life and ministry of Bible believing Christians!³⁶

KEY BELIEF #7: LOGICAL FALLACIES – Based on his unique translation of 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 Stegall makes the following leap of logic. He writes: "As this relates to 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 we could say that just as someone would not bury a living person, so the Lord's burial (v. 4a) was dependent upon Him dying first (v. 3b). And just as a person could not be seen by others unless he arose from the dead, so the Lord's post-resurrection appearances (v. 5a) were dependent upon Him rising from the dead first (v. 4b). In this respect, the burial and appearances are clearly [?] seen to be semantically subordinate to the two main clauses in the passage. The claim that 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 contains a 'golden chain' of elements that *must be* of equal theological weight and that *must* all be elements of the saving gospel, is clearly [?] seen to be unfounded."³⁷ Besides being confusing there are several obvious flaws in Stegall's statements. As Norman Geisler would say, the logic is self-refuting. Notice that Stegall is taking an equally firm contrary position to the one he caricatures in that he believes certain elements of 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 *must not* be of equal theological weight and *must not* be elements of the saving gospel. Furthermore, if Stegall's logic and reasoning are consistently applied to the passage, we are left to erroneously conclude that Christ's resurrection is semantically subordinate to His death because we could say that just as someone would not resurrect a living person, so the Lord's

resurrection (v. 4b) was dependent upon Him dying first (v. 3b). Based on Stegall logic and reasoning the argument could also be made that Christ's resurrection is also subordinate to His burial because His resurrection was dependent upon Him being buried first. Is Christ's resurrection now not part of the gospel because it is dependent upon His death and burial? Of course not. Although these conclusions are consistent with Stegall's logic they are at odds not only with the content of the gospel but also with the entire context of the passage which stresses the importance of the resurrection.

Another problem with Stegall's reductionist reasoning is that it evidences the logical fallacy of being *non sequitur*. In other words, Stegall's conclusion does not follow his premise. Stegall's premise is that Christ's burial and appearances should be understood in a subordinate sense; his conclusion is that they are not elements of the gospel. This logical fallacy results from his failure to distinguish the difference between *correlation* and *content*. Stegall is confusing a supposed "deep structure level" correlation with the specific content of the gospel. However, the content of the gospel is not changed by some supposed "deep structure level" relationship of the clauses. In other words, even if two of the four coordinate content clauses in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 have a subordinate relationship or correlation to the others, all four clauses still remain content clauses because each is introduced by a *hoti* ("that") content conjunction. A supposed subordination of Christ's burial and appearances does not equate to their elimination from the gospel. Hence, Stegall's entire argument is rather beside the point and gives no validation to his partial gospel.³⁸

KEY BELIEF #8: MISREPRESENTATION OF TRADITION – Stegall alleges that "it has been the standard Free Grace position even long before the advent of the crossless doctrine that the

burial and appearances are technically not the gospel but proofs of it."³⁹ Stegall promotes the same idea later in his book when he contends that "the vast majority of grace-oriented Bible teachers recognize that the contents of the saving gospel include Christ's death and resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 but not the supporting evidences of His burial and post-resurrection appearances".⁴⁰ In response to Stegall's claims I would like to direct the reader to an excellent article written last year by George Meisinger, the president of Chafer Theological Seminary – "a non-crossless Free Grace school"⁴¹ (to use Stegall's words). The article is titled: "[The Gospel Paul Preached: A Church Age Model of Evangelistic Content](#)". It's clear from the article that Meisinger represents and affirms "the standard Free Grace position on the gospel" yet does not agree with Stegall's no-burial interpretation of it.⁴²

KEY BELIEF #9: MAN'S OPINIONS – In his book Stegall writes: "Opinions among commentators are divided as to whether the phrase '*according to the Scriptures*' [in 1 Corinthians 15:4] qualifies the entire statement, '*and that He rose again the third day*'.⁴³ Wait a minute – "Opinions among commentators"? "BUT WHAT DOES THE SCRIPTURE SAY?" (Gal. 4:30, capitalization added; cf. Rom. 4:3). That's the only question that really matters. Let's back up for a minute and examine why Stegall makes such a comment in the first place. Stegall knows that he has some explaining to do in regards to his removal of "the third day" (1 Cor. 15:4) from the content of the gospel because he has no reason to remove it, at least if he wants to be consistent with his own reductionist reasoning (which views the twice repeated phrase "according to the Scriptures" in 1 Corinthians 15:3, 4 as marking out the real gospel). But Stegall knows that he has to remove the reference to the third day from the content of the gospel because the third day points to the burial of Christ (cf. Matt. 12:40, 27:63-64; Lk. 24:6-7; 1 Cor. 15:4).⁴⁴ And Stegall has removed the burial of Christ from the gospel. So Stegall defers to the "opinions among commentators" as his

new authority on the issue of the third day.⁴⁵ A few pages later in his book Stegall similarly appeals to the supposed conversion experiences "of a vast percentage of God's children in the world today".⁴⁶ The problem with Stegall's reductionist reasoning is that he is rejecting Jesus' statement on the matter, when He says, "*Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and rise again from the dead the third day*" (Lk. 24:46a, italics added; compare to the wording in Lk. 4:4, 8, 17, etc.). By saying, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should...rise again from the dead the third day", Jesus makes it clear that the reference to the third day is indeed "according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:4)! That's what the Scriptures say. Commenting on Luke 24:46, Everett F. Harrison affirms: "Here Jesus is not simply stating the fact of His resurrection on the third day, but rather the Scriptural necessity for its occurrence at that time. The same thing is true of Paul's statement in I Cor. 15:4 to the effect that the resurrection transpired on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures."⁴⁷

KEY BELIEF #10: HYPOTHETICAL SCENARIOS – Stegall speaks rather approvingly of Zane Hodges' Deserted Island Scenario. He actually describes it as "a helpful illustration that raises some extremely important spiritual questions."⁴⁸ Others in the Free Grace movement don't exactly share Stegall's sentiments. For example, Bob Nyberg states: "Some times hypotheticals are not helpful".⁴⁹ John Malone declares: "Zane Hodges proposes a theoretical circumstance that is preposterous on its face, and invalid in its details."⁵⁰ Fred Lybrand echoes these voices when he calls Hodges' scenario "a mistake".⁵¹ Maybe Stegall's admiration for the "strange scenario"⁵² explains why he is now proposing one of his own. Amazingly, Stegall is forcing a portion of God's Word into a strange scenario similar to the one imagined by Zane Hodges! While Hodges uses a few verses from the Gospel of John, Stegall uses the book of Galatians. Let's take a closer look at each scenario.

The Deserted Island Scenario

Hodges states: "Let me begin with a strange scenario. Try to imagine an unsaved person marooned on a tiny, uninhabited island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. He has never heard about Christianity in his life. One day a wave washes a fragment of paper up onto the beach. It is wet but still partly readable. On that paper are the words of John 6:43-47. 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). 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? 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."⁵³

The Galatians-Only Scenario

Stegall presents his strange scenario in subtler terms than Hodges and in the form of a rhetorical question. Notice what he says: "Are we honestly to believe that a lost soul could actually read and believe every word of Galatians and yet slip into hell for lack of knowledge about Christ's burial and post-resurrection appearances to Peter and the twelve?!"⁵⁴

Similar to Hodges, Stegall is arguing that the lost soul is now saved as a result of believing the limited information presented to him. But notice that the book of Galatians doesn't even contain

all five of Stegall's "essential, defining elements of the Gospel which must be believed for one to receive eternal salvation"⁵⁵ – namely, the truth that "Jesus Christ rose bodily from the dead"!⁵⁶ There is only one mention of Christ's resurrection in the book of Galatians (Gal. 1:1, "raised"/*egeiro*) – as Stegall even indicates.⁵⁷ And the word Paul uses for resurrection (*egeiro*) doesn't mean bodily resurrection. Instead, it's defined to mean simply: "wake, rouse...fig. raise, help to rise".⁵⁸ This is why even in English, the verse simply says that "God the Father...raised Him from the dead" (Gal. 1:1). Even though a bodily resurrection is not explicit in the lexical definition of *egeiro*, the truth of Christ's bodily resurrection is of course implied in the book of Galatians – just like the truths of Christ's burial and resurrection appearances (e.g. Gal. 1:8, 9, 11, 4:13; cf. Acts 13:28-31).⁵⁹ No wonder William Lane Craig says, "In being raised from the dead, Christ is raised from the grave. In fact the very verbs *egegetai* [a form of the word *egeiro*] and *anistanai* [another Greek word for "raised" – though not found in Galatians] **imply** that the grave is left empty. The notion of resurrection is unintelligible with regard to the spirit or soul alone. The very words **imply** resurrection of the body."⁶⁰ In light of these exegetical truths, Stegall must concede that one of his "essential, defining elements of the Gospel"⁶¹ is only implicit in the book of Galatians. Thus, the reductionist reasoning evident in the Galatians-Only Scenario is fallacious, for it is the logical fallacy of [special pleading](#) (i.e. a double standard) for Stegall to require Christ's burial and appearances to be explicitly stated in Galatians before he will grant them true gospel status while not applying this same requirement to one of his gospel essentials (Christ's bodily resurrection).⁶²

KEY BELIEF #11: FICTIONAL CASE STUDIES – In his book Stegall presents two hypothetical case studies in an attempt to show that the lost don't have to believe in Christ's burial, three day interment, or resurrection appearances to be saved. Ironically, Stegall prefaces his fictional case

studies by saying: "when seeking to determine the contents of saving faith, we are not considering what is typical for most Christians, or even what is logical [is Stegall admitting that his groundless gospel is illogical?], but rather what is divinely required for eternal life according to the Word of God."⁶³ In light of this statement the reader would naturally expect Stegall to explain what the Bible says about what's required for eternal life, *but Stegall does just the opposite*. Instead of addressing any biblical basis, Stegall goes on to present two fictional case studies of people who supposedly got saved even though they rejected the truths of Christ's burial, three day interment, and resurrection appearances.⁶⁴ Amazingly, Stegall then concludes that these facts are not part of the gospel.⁶⁵ The real problem with Stegall's fictional case studies is not the case studies themselves, but that Stegall uses them to form soteriological conclusions about the gospel. This mindset is more postmodern than it is biblical. Stegall would do well to follow his own doctrinal statement when it says: "We believe the Bible is the only infallible rule for all faith and practice, and it is therefore solely sufficient (**apart from human wisdom** and ecclesiastical tradition) to lead an individual to salvation".⁶⁶

KEY BELIEF #12: PERSONAL EXPERIENCES – Stegall contends that a valid reason to exclude the resurrection appearances of Christ from the gospel is because it "would nullify the salvation of a vast percentage of God's children in the world today many of whom cannot even identify the individual in verse 5 with the Aramaic name 'Cephas.'"⁶⁷ Stegall seems to be grasping at straws in an attempt to bolster his groundless gospel. His claims are false and exaggerated. No one in the Free Grace gospel debate is saying that a lost person must give the correct identity of "Cephas" (1 Cor. 15:5; cf. Jn. 1:42) in order to be saved. The lost are not required to pass an exam in theology. Instead, they are required to simply believe the gospel. (Chafer quotes Manly as saying: "A man who refuses to believe anything that he does not understand will have a very

short creed."⁶⁸) In addition to this, Stegall's argument is based more on experience than on the Bible. Since when is one's soteriology and definition of the gospel based on the supposed conversion experiences of "a vast percentage of God's children in the world today"?⁶⁹ A vast percentage of God's children in the world today also asked Jesus into their hearts, but unfortunately they were wrong.⁷⁰ Sadly, Stegall has allowed postmodern thinking to influence his understanding of the gospel. One's theology should never be based on popularity or percentage of opinion but instead should be grounded in God's Word. The words of Dennis Rokser are appropriate: "The accuracy of Scripture is not determined by a popularity contest...Will you base your beliefs and practice on the popular opinion of the human crowd or upon the unfailing and unchanging truths of the **Word of God**?"⁷¹

Conclusion

In introducing his mysterious triangle in the preface of his book Stegall reassures his readers: "The Lord has not been vague about what He requires us to believe in order to be born again. Nor has He hidden it from us. This is not a matter of the secret things belonging to the Lord in contrast to the truths He has revealed (Deut. 29:29)."⁷² Later in the book Stegall again affirms: "The 'gospel' was never meant to be cryptically concealed from mankind".⁷³ Yet ironically the groundless gospel of the non-buried and never-seen savior is indeed cryptic and puzzling! So is the complex belief system behind it. Thus, it's no surprise that Wilkin labels it: "Stegall's complicated system".⁷⁴ Amazingly, the cryptic and complex nature of Stegall's system is one of the defining characteristics of a mystery religion: "A mystery religion is any religion with an arcanum, or secret wisdom [like Stegall's strange triangle – which is unknown to the average Bible reader]. In a mystery religion, an inner core of beliefs [like the 3 sides of the Triforce

triangle or the 12 beliefs of Stegall's system], practices, and the religion's true nature, are revealed only to those who have been initiated into its secrets."⁷⁵ Wilkin quips: "Of course, this is why we need pastors like the author."⁷⁶ It's no wonder that after studying Stegall's "amazing triangular testimony"⁷⁷ and "virtual mirror reflections,"⁷⁸ Wilkin concludes: "BUYER BEWARE".⁷⁹

ENDNOTES:

¹ Bob Wilkin, "[A REVIEW OF THOMAS STEGALL'S *THE GOSPEL OF THE CHRIST*](#)," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* (Spring 2010): p. 7.

² The word veneer is defined as meaning "a superficial or deceptively attractive appearance, display, or effect: FACADE, GLOSS" ([Merriam-Webster Dictionary](#)).

³ In his book, Stegall gives six explicit reasons to reduce the gospel to his no-burial interpretation of it (Stegall, *The Gospel of the Christ*, pp. 564-588). Not surprisingly, all six of Stegall's reductionist reasonings can be traced back to one or more of the twelve key beliefs in his system. For instance, in the preface of his book Stegall presents his arbitrary "**Threefold Basis for the Contents of Saving Faith**" (ibid., p. 18). Under this heading Stegall immediately says: "As a reader, it will also be helpful for you to understand at the outset what the thesis of this book is based upon." (Ibid., p. 18.) Stegall then presents the reader with the "amazing triangular testimony" (ibid., p. 19) of his triangle [KEY BELIEF #1] complete with its "virtual mirror reflections" (ibid., p. 19) [KEY BELIEF #2] – he even includes a picture of it for added effect!

⁴ Thomas L. Stegall, *The Gospel of the Christ*, p. 19.

⁵ Ibid., p. 18.

⁶ Ibid., p. 19.

⁷ Ibid., p. 286.

⁸ For more information on the Masonic triangle see: "[Shedding light on Sheffield's 'lost' symbols](#)" and "[The Tau and the Triple Tau](#)".

⁹ See John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *Cult Watch*, pp. 104, 117; cf. John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *Secret Teachings*.

¹⁰ Fritz Ridenour writes: "In truth, Freemasonry's bedrock ideas come from ancient Gnostic, esoteric, and pagan sources." (Ridenour, *So What's The Difference?* [Ventura: Regal Books, 2001], p. 177); cf. John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *Cult Watch*; John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *Secret Teachings*.

¹¹ Thomas L. Stegall, *The Gospel of the Christ*, p. 42, bold added, italics his.

¹² Marvin R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, 4 Vols., Vol. 3, p. 486.

¹³ A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures of the New Testament*, commentary on Colossians 2:8, www.studylight.org/com/rwp/view.cgi?book=col&chapter=002&verse=008.

¹⁴ For further discussion of the groundless gospel's arcane and arbitrary basis, see my article titled: "[Getting the Gospel Right](#)".

¹⁵ Thomas L. Stegall, *The Gospel of the Christ*, p. 18.

¹⁶ Bob Wilkin, "[A REVIEW OF J. B. HIXSON'S GETTING THE GOSPEL WRONG: THE EVANGELICAL CRISIS NO ONE IS TALKING ABOUT](#)," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 21 (Spring 2008): p. 20.

¹⁷ Thomas L. Stegall, *The Gospel of the Christ*, 287; cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19, 286. For further discussion see "The Strange Beliefs of Stegall's System," KEY BELIEF #3: UNANSWERED THEOLOGICAL QUESTIONS (above).

¹⁸ Bob Wilkin, "[A REVIEW OF J. B. HIXSON'S GETTING THE GOSPEL WRONG](#)," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 21 (Spring 2008): p. 22.

¹⁹ Thomas L. Stegall, *The Gospel of the Christ*, p. 19.

²⁰ The phrase *sine qua non* is a term meaning "something absolutely indispensable or essential" ([Merriam-Webster Dictionary](#)). Stegall uses the phrase several times in his book (Stegall, *The*

Gospel of the Christ, pp. 42, 96-98, 197-198, 283). Note: The phrase *sine qua non* is Latin, not Greek; it is not found in the New Testament.

²¹ Thomas L. Stegall, *The Gospel of the Christ*, pp. 19, 286.

²² Wilkin correctly points out that "the burial of Jesus is part of the Biblical gospel as Paul says it is in 1 Cor 15:4". (Wilkin, "[A REVIEW OF J. B. HIXSON'S GETTING THE GOSPEL WRONG](#)," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 21 [Spring 2008]: p. 18; cf. Wilkin, "[A REVIEW OF THOMAS STEGALL'S THE GOSPEL OF THE CHRIST](#)," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 23 [Spring 2010]: p. 23.) Even Stegall once affirmed Christ's burial in the gospel as evidenced by the wording of his old church doctrinal statement. Under the heading "**SOLE CONDITION FOR SALVATION**", it read: "We believe the only correct response to the Gospel of grace which saves a soul from Hell is faith alone in Christ alone, whereby the lost sinner believes that Jesus Christ died for all his sins, was buried, and rose again from the dead (Jn. 1:12; 3:15-18, 5:24, 6:32-40, 8:24; Acts 16:30-31; 1 Cor. 15:1-4, 17)." (Excerpted from the original Word of Grace Bible Church doctrinal statement [2004].) After all the deacons who helped draft the original doctrinal statement either left the church, resigned, or passed away, Stegall proposed to change the wording and redefine the gospel. In his proposal he argued that the original doctrinal statement only "seemed to indicate" that Christ's burial was absolutely essential for someone to believe in order to go to heaven (Stegall, "Proposed Change" church handout [2007])! However, Stegall's claim is seen to be groundless in light of the fact that one of the Word of Grace Bible Church gospel tracts from around the same time assigns the same salvific value to Christ's burial in the gospel (see the "[Christ Has Bridged the Gulf](#)" tract, bold his). For more information see my blog post titled: "[Getting the Gospel Right](#)".

²³ Thomas L. Stegall, *The Gospel of the Christ*, p. 284.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 286.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid. p. 287, italics his, bold added.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 578, italics his.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 480, 512, 529, 536, 543, 561, 576, 578, 700, etc.; cf. "[Things of First Importance](#)" (see endnote 4 of that article).

³⁰ John Piper, "[How I Distinguish Between the Gospel and False Gospels](#)" (compiled from the sermon outline and the sermon audio [18:02 min. - 18:36 min.], bold and italics his.) Note: Although Piper is a Calvinist, even he is honest enough to admit the obvious: that the references to "the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3-4) are part of the gospel! Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. affirms: "'Of first importance' (*en protois*) in the gospel tradition that Paul has received and passes on is 'that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter and then to the Twelve' (1 Cor. 15:3-5). **Death and resurrection, not as isolated events but in their significance and as the**

fulfillment of Scripture (entailing revelatory, tradition-establishing appearances of the resurrected Christ to the apostles), are central to Paul's message." (Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., "Life-Giving Spirit': Probing The Center of Paul's Pneumatology", *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 41 [December 1998]: p. 574, bold added.)

³¹ Thomas L. Stegall, *The Gospel of the Christ*, p. 588, bold added.

³² Thomas L. Stegall, *The Gospel of the Christ*, p. 588; cf. Stegall "Proposed Change" church handout (2007). For more information see my article: "[Getting the Gospel Right](#)".

³³ Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, p. 667, note 2.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 668.

³⁵ Thomas L. Stegall, *The Gospel of the Christ*, p. 585, italics his.

³⁶ For more information see my articles: "Getting the Gospel Right" ([Part 1](#) & [Part 2](#)). Note: In Part 2, see endnote 10.

³⁷ Thomas L. Stegall, *The Gospel of the Christ*, p. 585.

³⁸ For more information see my articles: "Getting the Gospel Right" ([Part 1](#) & [Part 2](#)).

³⁹ Thomas L. Stegall, *The Gospel of the Christ*, p. 556.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 580.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 577.

⁴² Groundless gospel advocates would have us believe that Free Grace theology has always affirmed the spook savior of the groundless gospel – but this is hardly the case! In all my study of Free Grace theology I have not found *any* Free Grace theologians before Dennis Rokser and Tom Stegall who have *denied* that Christ's burial and appearances are part of the gospel. (Even Earl Radmacher affirms that the content of the gospel includes Christ's burial and appearances as stated in 1 Corinthians 15:3-5.)

The standard Free Grace position on the gospel has historically *included* (either explicitly or implicitly) Christ's burial and appearances in the gospel. For example, A. T. Pierson has well said: "Christianity rests on four facts – the *death, burial, rising, and appearing* of Christ. This constitutes the essence of the Gospel. Upon a *cross* and an empty *tomb* our faith is built." (Arthur T. Pierson, "[The Resurrection of Our Lord](#)," *The Homiletic Review*, Vol. 26 [July 1893]: pp. 72-73, italics his; cf. Donald K. Campbell, *The Theological Wordbook* [Nashville: Word Publishing, 2000], p. 142; Everett F. Harrison, "The Son of God Among the Sons of Men, Part 15: Jesus and Mary Magdalene," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 105 [October 1945]: p. 438; H. A. Ironside, "[The Mormon's Mistake, or What is the Gospel?](#)"; Keith Krell, "The Facts of Faith (1 Corinthians 15:1-11)"; William. R. Newell, *Romans Verse-By-Verse*, pp. 5, 6, 19, 20, 21, 24, 397; Miles J. Stanford, "[The Dispensational Gospels](#)"; Warren Wiersbe, "[Sanctified By Correction](#)"; Andy Stanley, "[Big Church, Part 4: Big Audience](#)," etc.)

⁴³ Thomas L. Stegall, *The Gospel of the Christ*, p. 560, note 60, italics his.

⁴⁴ Also see Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols., vol. 4, p. 82.

⁴⁵ Thomas L. Stegall, *The Gospel of the Christ*, p. 560, note 60.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 566.

⁴⁷ Everett F. Harrison, *The Christian Doctrine of Resurrection*, unpublished manuscript, pp. 54-55. Commenting on the similarly worded passage in Luke 18:31-34, Merrill C. Tenney affirms: "By the inclusion of the phrase [in Luke 18:31], 'the things that are written,' Jesus connected the events of His passion with the Old Testament." (Merrill C. Tenney, *The Reality of the Resurrection*, p. 31.)

⁴⁸ Thomas L. Stegall, *The Gospel of the Christ*, p. 83.

⁴⁹ Bob Nyberg, comment on "[THE CROSSLESS GOSPEL](#)" (accessed October 23, 2010).

⁵⁰ John Malone, "[Zane Hodges goes too far](#)" (accessed October 22, 2010).

⁵¹ Fred Lybrand, "[GES Gospel: Lybrand Open Letter](#)," p. 20.

⁵² Zane Hodges, "[How to Lead People to Christ: Part 1, The Content of Our Message](#)," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 13 (Spring 2000): p. 4.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Thomas L. Stegall, *The Gospel of the Christ*, 375; cf. Stegall, "[THE TRAGEDY OF THE CROSSLESS GOSPEL Pt. 9](#)," *Grace Family Journal* (Special Edition 2008): p. 21.

⁵⁵ Thomas L. Stegall, "[THE TRAGEDY OF THE CROSSLESS GOSPEL \(Pt. 1\)](#)," *Grace Family Journal* (Spring 2007): p. 9 (page 4 in the PDF file).

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Thomas L. Stegall, *The Gospel of the Christ*, p. 76; cf. Stegall, "[THE TRAGEDY OF THE CROSSLESS GOSPEL Pt. 3](#)," *Grace Family Journal* (Fall 2007): p. 7 (page 6 in the PDF file).

⁵⁸ Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, Frederick W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 214. Liddel and Scott give this definition for *egeiro*: "to awaken, wake up, rouse, stir: metaph. To rouse, stir up...to raise from the dead" (Liddel and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon, Abridged from Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 189). W. E. Vine has: "to arouse, to raise (W. E. Vine, Merrill F. Unger, William White, Jr., Editors, *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary*, p. 531). Likewise, Bill Mounce has: "raise up, wake" (William D. Mounce, *Basics of Biblical Greek*, p. 421). Also see *Robertson's Word Pictures in the New Testament*, commentary on Galatians 1:1.

⁵⁹ In answering the question "**Where is Paul's Gospel to the Galatians?**," even Stegall admits that it is in "Acts 13, where Paul's evangelistic message to the churches of Southern Galatia is recorded." (Stegall, *The Gospel of the Christ*, p. 340, bold and italics his; cf. Stegall, "[THE TRAGEDY OF THE CROSSLESS GOSPEL Pt. 9](#)," *Grace Family Journal* [Special Edition 2008]: p. 3.) Later in his book Stegall once again declares that "the content of Paul's gospel has already been recorded for us in Acts 13". (Stegall, *The Gospel of the Christ*, p. 347; cf. Stegall, "[THE TRAGEDY OF THE CROSSLESS GOSPEL Pt. 9](#)," *Grace Family Journal* [Special Edition 2008]: p. 6.) Another pro-groundless advocate likewise affirms: "In Galatians 1:8-9, Paul states plainly that any gospel other than the one he had preached to the Galatians during his visit to them is a false gospel. Scripture provides a record of the precise gospel that Paul preached to the Galatians during his first missionary journey. That record is contained in Acts 13." (J. B. Hixson, *Getting the Gospel Wrong*, pp. 154-155.)

⁶⁰ William Lane Craig, "[The Historicity of the Empty Tomb of Jesus](#)," italics his, bold added.

⁶¹ Thomas Stegall, "[THE TRAGEDY OF THE CROSSLESS GOSPEL \(Pt. 1\)](#)," *Grace Family Journal* (Spring 2007): p. 9 (page 4 in the PDF file).

⁶² The Galatians-Only Scenario will be discussed in more detail in a future multi-part blog series titled: "[The Dangers of the Deserted Island Scenarios](#)". At this point I simply want to expose Stegall's Galatians-Only Scenario and note that it's one of the key beliefs behind the groundless gospel.

⁶³ Thomas L. Stegall, *The Gospel of the Christ*, p. 561.

⁶⁴ Ibid., pp. 561-563.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 563.

⁶⁶ "THE DOCTRINAL STATEMENT OF THE WORD OF GRACE BIBLE CHURCH, THE HOLY SCRIPTURES" (accessed September 22, 2010), bold added.

⁶⁷ Thomas L. Stegall, *The Gospel of the Christ*, p. 566.

⁶⁸ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols., vol. 1, p. 75.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Cf. Dennis Rokser, *Seven Reasons NOT To Ask Jesus Into Your Heart* (Duluth: 3rd Edition, 2005).

⁷¹ Ibid., pp. 36-37 (pp. 38-39 in the aforementioned online booklet; pp. 19-20 in the PDF document).

⁷² Thomas L. Stegall, *The Gospel of the Christ*, p. 18.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 277.

⁷⁴ Bob Wilkin, "[A REVIEW OF THOMAS STEGALL'S *THE GOSPEL OF THE CHRIST*](#)," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* (Spring 2010): p. 22.

⁷⁵ WikiPagan, "[Mystery Religion](#)," http://pagan.wikia.com/wiki/Mystery_religion (accessed October 30, 2010).

⁷⁶ Bob Wilkin, "[A REVIEW OF THOMAS STEGALL'S *THE GOSPEL OF THE CHRIST*](#)," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* (Spring 2010): 23.

⁷⁷ Thomas L. Stegall, *The Gospel of the Christ*, p. 19.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Bob Wilkin, "[A REVIEW OF THOMAS STEGALL'S *THE GOSPEL OF THE CHRIST*](#)," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* (Spring 2010): p. 29; cf. Matthew 16:6. For more information see my article: "[Things of First Importance](#)".