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Getting Jesus in Focus

A Biblical Response to the Grace Evangelical Society (GES)
Regarding "the Saving Message"

by Jonathan Perreault

Preface

This article provides a biblical and critical examination of the GES Gospel—what they call “the saving message”—in order to determine how it aligns with the saving message as presented by the Apostles in the New Testament, as well as by Jesus Himself. I ask those who share my desire for biblical fidelity to seriously consider what I say, and I'm confident that the Lord will give understanding in these matters. This article is not intended to be a deep theological treatise, but rather "by setting forth the truth plainly, we commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God" (2 Cor. 4:2, NIV).

Introduction

John 6:47 is the favorite proof-text of the Grace Evangelical Society which they use (and abuse) in their attempt to show that “the saving message” in the New Testament is nothing more than “Believe in Jesus for eternal life.” But is this really what John 6:47 teaches? A closer examination of this and other Scriptures is the focus of my article.

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The Bane of Syncretism

Does an unsaved man who "has never heard about Christianity in his life"[1] automatically believe in the right "Jesus" if he reads and believes John 6:47 without any other context? To think that he does seems not only naïve but also factually incorrect, as any seasoned missionary will attest. One of the biggest problems on the mission field is syncretism, or the amalgamation of false and even pagan concepts with biblical truth. And lest someone think that there is only one concept of the biblical "Jesus," think again!

Which Biblical Jesus?

Did you know that there are at least three different people named "Jesus" in the Bible? If you did, you are probably ahead of most. Let's list them:

- A) True Jesus (Jn. 14:6)
- B) Another Jesus (2 Cor. 11:4)
- C) Jesus who is called Justus (Col. 4:11)

So here we have at least three different people named "Jesus"—all from the Bible! And if we add to the list all the "false Christs" (Matt. 24:24; Mk. 13:22) whom Jesus specifically warns us about—the list starts to get quite long, does it not?

Will the Right Jesus Please Stand Up!

So which "Jesus" is the right Jesus? Some Free Grace people might say, "Well, of course the Jesus in John's Gospel is the right Jesus." Yes, but John 6:47 by itself does not automatically distinguish or differentiate the right "Jesus" from "another Jesus," because even Jesus said that there are "false Christs" who will deceive many (Matt. 24:24; Mk. 13:22; cf. Matt. 24:4-5; Mk. 13:5-6; Lk. 21:8). Remember, Satan loves to quote the Bible (cf. Matt. 4:5-6; Luke 4:1-13). But he takes it out of context or in some other way twists it and distorts its true meaning. My point is that it's assuming quite a lot to suppose that someone who "has never heard about Christianity in his life" (so says Zane Hodges) will automatically believe in the right "Jesus"! How are we to know for sure if the unsaved person is actually believing in the correct "Jesus" for eternal life? Surely a Mormon, for example, is not believing in the true Jesus. Mormons believe that "Jesus" is the step-brother of Lucifer! Are people saved if they believe in their false idea of "Jesus" when they hear John 6:47? I hope that every Bible-believing Christian would answer "No," since the Mormon conception of "Jesus" is actually not the true Jesus but rather is, as the Apostle Paul says, "another Jesus" (2 Cor. 11:4). This shows that there must be more information in order to specify the right "Jesus".

And in reference to the Apostle Paul, he says that his gospel—"the gospel of God" (Rom. 1:1)—was "promised beforehand through His prophets in the holy Scriptures" (Rom. 1:2). Thus Paul's gospel is not "according to the Book of Mormon," for example. And furthermore, Paul preached "Christ crucified" (1 Cor.

1:23). This also narrows down the identity of "Jesus," doesn't it? Paul did not preach just any "Jesus," but rather, he specifically preached "Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (1 Cor. 1:23, NIV). Why would Paul preach a message that was a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles if it wasn't essential? Surely Paul would not intentionally put a stumbling block in the path of those whom he desired to bring to Christ! The answer of course, is because Christ and Him crucified is "the message preached to save those who believe" (1 Cor. 1:21). In the context of 1 Corinthians 1:17-2:5, Paul is talking about salvation in the sense of eternal salvation, i.e., to be saved from "perishing" (reference 1 Cor. 1:18), just as Jesus said in John 3:16. The only difference is that Paul lived after the Cross, did he not? And now after the Cross, that fact is also necessary to believe because God says so in His Word (see 1 Cor. 1:17-24; cf. Gal. 1:11-12). Isn't that reason enough? Thus the GES folks who think that the saving message is Christ *uncrucified*, or as they put it, "believe in Jesus for eternal life" (without any necessity of believing specifically in "Christ crucified") fail to adequately explain these passages. Paul makes it clear in 1 Cor. 1:17-18 that the gospel (which he calls "the word of the cross") is not just helpful information, but rather the saving message itself, "the message preached to save those who believe" (1 Cor. 1:21).

What About the Gospel of John?

Someone might ask, "But isn't John 3:16 the saving message?" In response I would ask: Did Paul preach John 3:16? Most people might not realize this, but John 3:16 (as part of John's Gospel) wasn't even written until many years after Paul died! That's not to say that John 3:16 isn't important. But it's only part of the message. (A very important part, but still only part of the message.) The truth is, what Jesus says in John 3:16 is only about 5% of the information that He shared with Nicodemus in the third chapter of John's Gospel. Something else that Jesus said to Nicodemus is, "You must be born again" (Jn. 3:3). How is a person born again? What does the Bible say? Because John chapter 3 isn't the only place in the Bible that talks about being born again. In 1 Corinthians 4:15, the apostle Paul says to the Corinthians—his spiritual children in the Christian faith—"I have begotten you through the gospel." Thus according to Paul, it is "the gospel" by which a person is born again! What is the gospel? Again, hear Paul. He clarifies the specific content of the gospel in the very same epistle when he writes: "I want to remind you of the gospel...that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day

according to the Scriptures, and that He was seen..." (1 Cor. 15:3-5). Does this contradict the Gospel of John? Not at all. In 1 Corinthians 15:11, Paul says that all the apostles preached the very same message of Christ's death, burial, resurrection, and appearances. And similarly, in his epistle to the churches of Galatia (Gal. 2:1-9), Paul says that he submitted his gospel to the three reputed pillars (Peter, James, and John), and they added nothing to his message. They were "all on the same page" so to speak, about the gospel. Remember, the early church didn't even have what we know today as "The Gospel of John." (It wasn't written until John was an old man, probably in, say, 70-90 A.D.) But the early church *did* have the gospel! In declaring the gospel, Paul says that he was just passing along the message as he had received it (1 Cor. 15:3). And so it's incorrect to think of John's Gospel as "the be all and end all" in evangelism or that it's the only place to look for the saving message, because *The Gospel of John* didn't even exist for the first, say, 50 years of the church! But "the gospel" did! The gospel message was the core message of faith passed down from the very beginnings of the church.[2] According to Clement of Alexandria as related by the church historian Eusebius, John wrote his Gospel when he was well advanced in age, long after the first three Gospels had already been written. In regard to this, Eusebius writes: "The Gospels containing the genealogies, he says, were written first....But, last of all, John, perceiving that the external facts had been made plain in the Gospel, being urged by his friends, and inspired by the Spirit, composed a spiritual Gospel. This is the account of Clement." [3] And so John's Gospel was written relatively late compared to the other three Gospels. But long before the Apostle John wrote his Gospel, he and all the other apostles were preaching the Good News of "Christ crucified" (1 Cor. 1:23), "the message preached to save those who believe" (v. 21). Oh how we need to get back to the apostolic gospel! D. L. Moody was right on target when he said, "I believe that the nearer we keep to the apostles' way of presenting the gospel, the more success we will have." [4]

Finding the Apostle Paul's Gospel

What "Jesus" did Paul preach? What was "the saving message" according to him? What was his gospel? Because Paul clearly stated that the Corinthians were "begotten" (i.e., "born again") through his gospel (see 1 Cor. 4:15). So what exactly was Paul's gospel message? Isn't that the question we should be asking? Especially when we remember that Paul says he submitted his gospel to Peter, James, and John (see Gal. 2:1-9), and they all agreed with him! Paul says they

gave him "the right hand of fellowship" (Gal. 2:9). Furthermore, as I mentioned, Paul says that his gospel is the same message that all the apostles preached (see 1 Cor. 15:11). So either all the apostles were sorely mistaken, and we should just go out and start our own religion, or they were preaching the right message and the right Jesus! I, for one, affirm the latter. The apostles obviously preached the right gospel and the right Jesus. So now the question becomes, what is the apostolic gospel? What is the gospel message that Paul and all the apostles preached? Guess what? Paul tells us exactly what his gospel is! Isn't that great? We don't have to wonder anymore! (Why did we ever?) We don't have to be confused anymore! (Why were we ever?) In fact, Paul's gospel is so crystal clear that it could hardly be clearer! Paul tells us in specific detail, even building up to it so the importance of it is not lost on us (see 1 Cor. 15:1-2), what his gospel is. And Paul explains the gospel using four key verbs (see 1 Cor. 15:3-5). We might view them as the structural pillars of a building. Some people explain the gospel using two main pillars (or points), and that's fine. But personally, I'd want to have four pillars holding up my roof rather than just two! But regardless of whether we outline the gospel in two points or four points, here are the facts of the gospel according to the apostle Paul: 1) "that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 2) "and that He was buried," 3) "and that He was raised on the third day," 4) "and that He was seen..." (1 Cor. 15:3-5). This is the gospel message that was preached by the apostles and with which they won mighty victories!

Unfortunately the apostolic gospel has gotten quite dusty today. Many "evangelicals" don't preach it as the simple "Good News" it is. Often, they distort it. Sadly, they even deride it. It is too historical for them. Too factually wooden. Too real. But the Good News of Christ's death, burial, resurrection, and appearances—together with the apostolic explanation of those great facts, is the biblical gospel and the only true gospel (see 1 Cor. 15:3-5; cf. Isa. 53:5-10; Psa. 22:1-22, 40:1-3; Acts 2:22-32, 13:26-41). And that is the very message by which the Corinthians were "begotten" (1 Cor. 4:15)—by which they were "born again"! Think of it: the pagan Corinthians became "born again" Christians by believing the gospel message of "Christ crucified" (1 Cor. 1:23). For them, it was not "believe in Jesus for eternal life" but rather "Christ crucified"! Thus, for those Free Grace people who espouse "believe in Jesus for eternal life" as a saving message, maybe it's time to change your beliefs when they don't line up with the Bible. Unless there is more than one saving message? But that's impossible,

since Paul himself said that if anyone comes along and preaches "any other gospel," let him be accursed (see Gal. 1:6-9, KJV). So here we have two choices: either the saving message is Christ *uncrucified*, i.e. "believe in Jesus for eternal life" (the GES Gospel) or the saving message is "Christ crucified" ("the Glorious Gospel") as Paul states in 1 Corinthians 1:23 (cf. 2 Cor. 4:4). Those two messages cannot both be valid, because there is only one true gospel and those two messages are clearly fundamentally different in terms of their content. Namely, one includes "the message of the cross" (1 Cor. 1:18, NKJV) while the other does not. W. Graham Scroggie correctly observes: "A gospel without the Cross is not the Christian gospel, and, indeed, is no gospel at all. Paul summarizes the true gospel when he says that 'Christ died for our sins . . . and was buried, and rose again the third day . . . and was seen . . . ' (1 Cor. xv. 3-5)."[5] It has rightly been said: "A cross-less gospel is no gospel at all." [6] So which is it? Will you accept the Bible's statement of the saving message from the lips of Paul himself, or will you cling to the "washed up" [7] gospel of Zane Hodges' "Deserted Island Scenario" that has been disproven for years? The choice is clear. It's time to get back to the Bible! It's time to get back to the biblical gospel that was preached by the apostle Paul and by all the other apostles as well, which is the core message of "Christ crucified" (1 Cor. 1:23). As the old hymn says, "There is life for a look at the Crucified One, there is life at this moment for thee"! As the Free Grace theologian William R. Newell has said, "Paul's preaching was not, as is so much today, general disquisition on some subject, but *definite statements about the crucified One*, as he himself so insistently tells us in 1 Corinthians 15.3-5." [8] Newell goes on to say: "This story of Christ's dying for our sins, buried, raised, manifested, is the great wire along which runs God's mighty current of saving power. Beware lest you be putting up some little wire of your own, unconnected with the Divine throne, and therefore non-saving to those to whom you speak." [9]

What About the Deity of Christ?

Sadly, the GES does not affirm that the deity of Jesus is essential to believe for salvation, hence their "saving message" doesn't include it. Whereas the traditional Free Grace view—based on the clear teaching of God's Word—is that the deity of Jesus is essential to believe for salvation. Jesus Himself said, "Unless you believe that I AM, you will die in your sins" (Jn. 8:24). The title "I AM" (cf. Jn. 8:58-59) is an unmistakable reference to Exodus 3:14, when God said to

Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." I see the deity of Jesus set forth in the 1 Corinthians 15 passage in at least three ways:

1. In the TITLE *"the Christ"* (1 Cor. 15:3) – In 1 Corinthians 15:3 the apostle Paul uses Jesus' divine title as a name, saying: "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures..." (1 Cor. 15:3). The appellation "the Christ" (or "Christ") is Jesus' divine title (see Matt. 16:16; John 20:31) and indicates His deity. Commenting on 1 Corinthians 15:3, the New Testament scholar Gordon Fee affirms that here Paul "uses the divine title as a name."^[10]

2. In the TESTIMONY *"that He was raised"* (1 Cor. 15:4) – In 1 Corinthians 15:4 the apostle Paul goes on to say that Christ "was buried, and that He was raised"—that is, raised from the dead. In the book of Romans, Paul further explains that Jesus "was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead" (Rom. 1:4).

3. In the TIME ELEMENT *"on the third day"* (1 Cor. 15:4) – In 1 Corinthians 15:4 the apostle Paul further states that Christ "was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures..." (1 Cor. 15:4). The reference to Christ's resurrection specifically "on the third day" is an indication of Jesus' deity because it fulfills Jesus' own statement that "something greater than Jonah is here" (Matt. 12:41). Similarly, Jesus' resurrection on the third day indicates that "something greater than the temple is here" (Matt. 12:6; cf. Jn. 2:19-22). In other words, Jesus is more than a man—He is the Christ, the promised Messiah of the Old Testament Scriptures!

And so we see that 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 is the gospel in a nutshell, and the deity of Jesus is set forth in Paul's gospel in several ways. These are kernels of truth to be sure, but the truth is set forth nonetheless.

The GES Is Reinterpreting the Gospel

What are the defining moments in a person's life? We usually think of when someone did a great feat or some heroic act. In the sports world, we think of the moment—or moments—when a champion's legacy was cemented. This is exactly what Jesus did when he conquered sin, death, and the grave! This is indeed Good News! Thus it can be said that Paul's gospel defines Christ in terms of His person and saving work. The gospel defines who Christ is and what He

did. And this is specifically according to "the holy Scriptures" (Rom. 1:1-2, 10:8, 15-16; cf. Isa. 53:1-12), as opposed to some other holy book or belief system. The biblical gospel portrays Christ as the one who died for our sins, was buried, was raised on the third day, and appeared to His disciples (Isa. 53:1-12; cf. 1 Cor. 15:3-5). And that is the "Christ" whom each lost person must trust to be saved (Rom. 1:16; 1 Cor. 1:23, 15:3; Eph. 1:13; 2 Thess. 1:8-9). It's all quite simple, actually. It mainly tends to get complicated when false teachers (I say that lovingly! See Eph. 4:15; 1 Tim. 1:5) distort the clear teaching of God's Word. Sadly, the GES teachers have perverted the truth, and hence those who follow them are led astray. What God said concerning Israel in the Old Testament is unfortunately true of some in the church as well: "For those who guide this people are leading them astray; and those who are guided by them are brought to confusion" (Isa. 9:16, NASB). False teaching also leads to schisms (cf. Rom. 16:17). That's why Paul said to the Corinthians, "There must be factions among you, so that those who are approved may become evident" (1 Cor. 11:19). Suffice it to say that the GES Gospel is not only disproved, it's disapproved. It's ironic that the GES talks so much about the Judgment Seat of Christ, in light of the fact that their gospel—what they call "the saving message"—is actually disapproved. And thus all who want to be pleasing to the Lord should "come out from among them and be ye separate, saith the Lord. And touch not the unclean thing, and I will accept you, and I will be a Father unto you" (2 Cor. 6:17-18).[11] For those of us who want to enjoy fellowship with the Lord, we must separate from false doctrine. Because as the apostle Paul said, "A little leaven leavens the whole lump" (Gal. 5:9).

"The Deserted Island Scenario" Revisited

Have you ever seen a movie that is part two of the original? I'm sure we all have. If Hodges' "Deserted Island Scenario" from his 2000 journal article is Part 1, let's return to the island and see if we can't rescue the stranded man.[12] Think of this as *The Deserted Island Scenario II*. Let's evangelize the marooned person using Hodges' method. For example, using Hodges' model of ripping Bible verses out of context, an unsaved person could come across a scrap of paper containing portions of text from Colossians 4:11a and some other Bible verse—let's say 1 Timothy 1:16b. So the only readable portions are: "Jesus [Col. 4:11a, NKJV]...believe on Him for everlasting life [1 Tim. 1:16b, NKJV]." When an unsaved person believes these Bible verses (!) and places their faith in this "Jesus" (!) for "everlasting life," according to the logic of the GES view, he's

saved right? The man believed in "Jesus," didn't he? It's the biblical "Jesus," isn't it? The words that the man read are straight out of the Bible! Yet in reality, the unsaved man believed in "Jesus who is called Justus" (Col. 4:11), not the Jesus who said, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No man comes to the Father except through Me" (Jn. 14:6). Thus according to Jesus Himself, the marooned islander would not be saved, even though he believed in someone named "Jesus"—because it wasn't the right Jesus! Concerning Him, the Bible says: "Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is no other name under heaven given among men, by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12, Webster's translation). This illustrates the fact that since there is more than one biblical "Jesus," the hearer must be presented with enough information in order to distinguish the difference, so the would-be convert does not mistakenly trust in a merely human "Jesus" or "another Jesus" (2 Cor. 11:4), neither of whom can save. In other words, a lost person must have enough information in order to identify the right "Jesus".

This exposes the fallacy of the GES view. Their saving message of "Believe in Jesus for eternal life" is not specific enough to tell a person who "Jesus" really is. Because as I have just pointed out, the Bible itself mentions more than one Jesus! Not even considering any other belief system and whatever false conception of Jesus a person might have, but just looking at the Bible it's evident that there isn't just one individual named "Jesus". That's why I asked the question earlier in the article, "Which Biblical Jesus?" And it's not just an issue of mistaken identity or semantics because the apostle Paul says there is "another Jesus" (1 Cor. 11:4) that is not the true Jesus. We could call this false Jesus, "Pseudo Jesus". And believing in Pseudo Jesus will result in pseudo salvation! Because only the right Jesus saves (see Acts 4:12). Thus the issue is one of real importance, because it is the difference between Heaven or Hell! So my point is that according to the GES Gospel, the marooned islander is considered saved because he supposedly "believed in Jesus for eternal life." The glaring problem of course, is that he believed in the wrong Jesus! The man actually believed in "Jesus who is called Justus" (Col. 4:11), not Jesus of Nazareth. Both Jesuses are biblical in the sense that both are mentioned in the Bible, but only one of them can offer real salvation. And that is the whole point. It is not enough to tell a lost person to simply believe in a nondescript (or mostly nondescript) and vacuous "Jesus" for eternal life, because more information is needed in order to specify the right Jesus as opposed to "another Jesus" (2 Cor. 11:4).

Clarifying the "Jesus Justus" Illustration

Someone might ask, "*Where does it say anywhere in the Bible that Jesus who is called Justus offers eternal life to the one who simply believes in him for it?*"[13] But notice I didn't say "Jesus who is called Justus offers eternal life." I said that according to Hodges' Deserted Island Scenario, if a marooned islander finds a few scraps of paper *from the Bible* that have washed ashore and the only readable portions are "Jesus [Col. 4:11a, NKJV]...believe on Him for everlasting life [1 Tim. 1:16b, NKJV]," then this "Jesus" would be in reference to "Jesus who is called Justus," not Jesus of Nazareth! Yet this "Jesus who is called Justus" is nonetheless a biblical "Jesus" in the sense that he is a "Jesus" who is mentioned in the Bible! But obviously this "Jesus who is called Justus" is far different from He who said, "Come unto Me, all ye who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). Therefore, this proves that simply believing in someone from the Bible with the name "Jesus" is not necessarily the same as believing in the Jesus who has the power to save a person from their sins and guarantees their eternal destiny. To be clear, I am not suggesting that anyone normally mistakes Jesus Justus for Christ. Rather, the illustration demonstrates a vital logical principle: that the bare name "Jesus" by itself is not a sufficient identifier. Because "Jesus who is also called Justus" was a sinner (see Romans 3:10). Thus, this is a clear example of a sinful "Jesus" mentioned in the Bible![14] But although this "Jesus" is straight out of the Bible, it would do no good to trust in him for eternal life—which someone could mistakenly do if they have no context other than "Believe in Jesus [?] for eternal life."

And actually, trusting in such a pseudo-savior would be a real hindrance to a person getting saved. It would lull the would-be convert into a false sense of security, making him think he's already saved because he trusted in someone named "Jesus" for eternal life. When in reality the person remains lost in his sins, having never trusted in the *true* Savior. Thus, simply because someone is believing in a "Jesus" from the Bible doesn't necessarily mean it's the right Jesus. It could be a pseudo-Jesus. It could be a sinful Jesus. It could be "another Jesus" (2 Cor. 11:4). While a fragmented piece of paper might seem like an extreme example, this is precisely how syncretism operates in reality. When a person from a non-Christian background hears only a name and a promise without the structural framework of the cross, their own mind acts as the "cut-and-paste" tool—marrying the biblical name "Jesus" to a completely foreign, sinful, or

mythological concept of a savior. So this just shows that the GES reasoning is false when they say: "If they're reading from the pages of scripture, or hearing about the Jesus of scripture, then they are believing in the right historical Jesus." [15] That is false, based on the fact that the Bible itself refers to more than one "Jesus" (John 20:30-31; 1 Cor. 11:4; Col. 4:11), only one of which is the true Savior (Acts 4:12). The point is that a bare reference to "Jesus" (even one who promises "eternal life," cf. Matt. 24:24; Mk. 13:22) is insufficient by itself to identify the right "Jesus".

Believing in the Wrong "Jesus"

But there is another point to be made in regard to when Zane Hodges says, "But the simple fact remains that no one has ever believed in Jesus of Nazareth for the gift of eternal life, who did not get it!" [16] In response to Hodges' statement, I would ask: "How do you know that?" Because if someone believed in the wrong "Jesus" who was also from "Nazareth," would he or she receive eternal life? Obviously only one "Jesus" is the "guarantor of eternal life"! For example, what if there was another person named "Jesus" who also lived (or lives) in a city called "Nazareth"? That's not out of the realm of possibility. The name "Jesus" was (and is) a very common name! This just highlights the fact that the GES way of thinking is flawed. In other words, one of the problems with Hodges' "name it and claim it" message is that it only begs the question: "Who is Jesus?" Hodges would answer "Jesus of Nazareth," but unfortunately that information is not contained in John 6:47, nor is that information included in the vast majority of Bible verses which the GES claims is "the saving message". And even when a Bible verse does specify "Jesus of Nazareth," there still could be another person named "Jesus" who was also "from Nazareth." The apostle Paul spoke of "another Jesus whom we have not preached" (2 Cor. 11:4). In fact, Jesus Himself said to watch out for "false Christs" (Matt. 24:24). If people simply believe in "the name of Jesus" [17] for eternal life, could they not be trusting in "another Jesus" (a merely human Jesus, for example)—one that the apostles didn't preach? This is indeed possible, especially when it is remembered that Satan, "the father of lies" (Jn. 8:44), also promises eternal life (see Gen. 3:4). So the name "Jesus" and promise of "eternal life" cannot be the only determining factors in recognizing the right Jesus, the One who is the Savior of the world.

Why Clarify If It's Automatic?

If something is already clear, it doesn't need further clarification. Likewise, if identifying the right Jesus were automatic—meaning it's already clear who He is—it would require no extra information. I want to apply these concepts to the GES Gospel. Let's return again to Hodges' previous statement, because I want to look at it in more detail and from a slightly different angle. Hodges said: "But the simple fact remains that no one has ever believed in Jesus of Nazareth for the gift of eternal life, who did not get it!" Notice here that Hodges is adding the phrase "of Nazareth" to his saving message. This is an unwitting admission on Hodges' part, because it shows that he instinctively knows that his saving message does not provide sufficient information in order for a lost person to be saved. Because when an unsaved person hears and believes John 6:47, they are not necessarily believing in Jesus "of Nazareth" (that's Hodges' statement, not mine) because that information is not contained in John 6:47. If the name "Jesus" and the promise of "eternal life" are the only determining factors in recognizing the real Jesus, then why does Hodges feel the need to explain the name further by adding "of Nazareth"? The answer, of course, is that even Hodges realizes that the name "Jesus" can refer to virtually anyone! The fact that Hodges added the qualifying phrase "of Nazareth" to the name "Jesus" proves this fact clearly. Even in Scripture (!) there is an example of another "Jesus" besides the one referred to by Hodges (cf. my comments above). In Colossians 4:11, for example, there is a "Jesus who is called Justus" (NKJV). That's clearly a different "Jesus" than the "Jesus of Nazareth" whom Hodges is describing. This example shows that it is not valid to say "if [unsaved people are] reading from the pages of scripture, or hearing about the Jesus of scripture, then they are believing in the right historical Jesus." [18] That statement is not true, because there is more than one person named "Jesus" in Scripture! And if we are going to start ripping Bible verses out of context as Hodges did in his "Deserted Island Scenario," then it would be especially easy to get the true Jesus confused with someone else by the same name—especially if it is another "Jesus" from the Bible.

Another Guarantor of Eternal Life?

Not only is there more than one "Jesus" described on the pages of Scripture (cf. 2 Cor. 11:4; Col. 4:11), but there are also "false Christs" (Matt. 24:24) who will deceive many. Thus, it is not true to say "There is no other Jesus making that promise [of eternal life] on the pages of scripture." [19] Remember, Hodges

defines the term "Christ" to mean "guarantor of eternal life." Thus, to be consistent he would have to admit that a "false Christ" is a false guarantor of eternal life! A false promiser of eternal life. Jesus warns: "See to it that no one misleads you. For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and will mislead many." (Matt. 24:4-5). So the name "Jesus" and promise of "eternal life" (which Satan also promises in Gen. 3:4, although falsely; cf. Matt. 24:24) cannot be the only determining factors in recognizing the right Jesus.

Satan Can Quote Scripture Too

And here's another reason why it's not true that just because a lost person is hearing about "the Jesus of Scripture" they are thus automatically believing in the right "Jesus": because Satan also quotes Scripture! Just read the N.T. and you will find him quoting Scripture.[20] But the problem of course, is that he distorts it. He uses it for his own purposes. He deceives people with it. Satan is a deceiver (2 Cor. 11:1-4; Rev. 12:9). When he tempted Jesus in the Gospels, although he quoted from Psalm 91:11-12 (see Matt. 4:6; Lk. 4:9-11), he intentionally twisted its meaning. Just compare what Satan says to Jesus in Matthew 4:6 and Luke 4:10-11 with what Psalm 91 actually says and you'll notice that Satan left out Psalm 91:11b: "to guard you in all your ways." That single omission changes the entire meaning of the verse, because in Psalm 91, "in all your ways" refers to living in obedience to God's will, not acting with reckless presumption as the Devil was tempting Jesus to do by suggesting that He jump off the pinnacle of the temple! This just highlights the fact that taking Bible verses out of context and building a doctrine on it is fraught with error.

Saved By A Lack of Knowledge?

Yet this is the thinking of the Grace Evangelical Society in regard to "the saving message" (cf. Hodges' Deserted Island Scenario). They rip John 6:47 out of context and build a doctrine on it. Whereas in the Old Testament, God says: "My people [the nation of Israel] are destroyed for lack of knowledge" (Hosea 4:6). God doesn't say, "My people are saved by lack of knowledge." Yet that is the implicit premise of Hodges' "saving message," because he is attempting to find the "barest minimum"[21] amount of information necessary in order for a person to get saved. This explains Hodges' statement after presenting his infamous "Deserted Island Scenario," when he rather nonchalantly remarked, "I suspect that there are some grace people who would say that this man is not saved because he doesn't know enough." [22] Yes, obviously! And the reason why some

grace people would say that is precisely because the man literally *doesn't* know enough. According to the Bible, salvation is based on a person receiving "the message of truth, the gospel" (Eph. 1:13), in contrast to having a lack of knowledge about it. Paul says, "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God" (Rom. 10:17). In context, Paul is specifically referring to people hearing the gospel message (see Rom. 10:8, 15-16; cf. Isa. 53:1-12), not merely the name "Jesus" and a promise of "eternal life". It is the gospel message that is the truth by which a person is saved (see Eph. 1:12-13). As James Moffatt has stated: "For Paul, the gospel is the saving message."^[23]

Examining the GES Proof Texts

Here I will analyze four key GES proof-texts and show how they don't support the GES minimalist view of "the saving message". The four texts that I will look at are: John 5:24, John 6:47, John 11:25-27, and John 20:30-31.

John 5:24 – *"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."* Does John 5:24 contain the GES "saving message"? John 5:24 doesn't even contain the name "Jesus," (!) which is an essential element of the GES Gospel according to Hodges. Here is his exact statement: "It is the name of Jesus that brings salvation whenever anyone believes in that name as his or her sure hope of eternal well-being."^[24] So if John 5:24 doesn't contain that name, how can it be a "saving message"? A GES person might respond by saying that the person speaking is in fact the right Jesus. But my point is that such an appeal contradicts their own premise that their minimalist "saving message" is *by itself* and without any other context sufficient information in order for a person to correctly identify who "Jesus" is. And thus if a GES person says that the surrounding context of John 5:24 identifies who is speaking in verse 24, such an argument falsifies their own position that the "saving message" *by itself* provides sufficient information. And even if the hearer somehow knows who is speaking, the content of John 5:24 apart from the biblical context is still not sufficient to differentiate "Jesus" from "another Jesus" (2 Cor. 11:4) who might also promise his would-be converts some sort of "eternal life"—as Satan did when he told Eve in the Garden of Eden: "You shall not die" (Gen. 3:4).

John 6:47 – *"Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life."* Again, this Bible verse doesn't contain "the name of Jesus" either. So how can it be a saving message? It fails to meet Hodges' own criteria of what is necessary for a person to believe for salvation. And if a GES proponent replies and says that the words "in Me" in John 6:47 are functionally equivalent to "the name of Jesus," I would respond by pointing out two things: (1) the words "in Me" in John 6:47 are not in the oldest (and I believe also the most reliable) Greek manuscripts of the New Testament. Those words only appear in the more recent Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, thus they are of questionable origin as to whether they are even original or not. The words "in Me" could have been added by a scribe to "clarify" the text. So essentially, the oldest Greek manuscripts of John 6:47 read: "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes has everlasting life." Okay, "believes" *what?* Or "believes" *who?* As the Free Grace scholar Dr. Charlie Bing has correctly stated, "It will do no good to call people to believe in something empty." [25] Fred Lybrand makes a similar point, specifically in regard to the GES interpretation of John 6:47. Commenting on the GES Gospel and specifically on Hodges' reliance on the disputed text of John 6:47, Lybrand has well said: "If any of the popular versions of the English Bible (except 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." [26] This brings me to my second point: (2) Even if we allow for the phrase "in Me" to be viewed as somehow equivalent to "the name of Jesus" (which it technically isn't), John 6:47 still doesn't specify what "Jesus" is promising eternal life. This goes back to my previous point about syncretism. Believing in "the name of Jesus" and the promise of "eternal life" without any other context is problematic because those words merely become placeholders for whatever misconceptions a lost person might have about who they might think "Jesus" is—such as a pagan god, a false deity, or in the western culture, the "Jesus" of Mormonism!

John 11:25-27 – *"Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?' She said to Him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe*

that You are the Christ, the Son of God, who is to come into the world." But doesn't Jesus' statement explicitly disprove Hodges' minimalist saving message by reason of the fact that Jesus specifically includes the fact of His resurrection as something to be believed?! Jesus doesn't merely say, "I am the life," i.e. eternal life, but He says "I am *the resurrection* and the life....Do you believe this?" I would like to see how proponents of the GES Gospel get around that clear statement of Jesus. Also note that "the resurrection" and "the life" are two distinct things. Murray J. Harris affirms: "The terms *the resurrection* (5:29) and *the life* (some witnesses omit *the life*—Metzger 199) are not virtually synonymous, with [as someone might suppose] 'the life' adding no new meaning but simply elucidating what is meant by 'resurrection' (so Schnackenburg 2:331). Rather, the two words are complementary."^[27] Interestingly, John Niemelä (a GES apologist) admits that in light of the grammatical structure of Jesus' following question to Martha in John 11:26, "Do you believe this?" (NKJV), both these items are necessary to believe! Niemelä writes: "The neuter form of the word *this* in 26b shows that Jesus did not just ask if she believed that He is *the resurrection* or just whether she believed that He is *the life*. Rather, He asked if she believed that He is both the resurrector and the life-giver."^[28] And in response to someone who might object that the present tense "I am" in 11:25 cannot possibly refer to Jesus' own future resurrection, Stier (I believe) correctly states that the present reality "does not exhaust its meaning,...still less does it exhaust the depths of this great testimony as intended for all future faith in the speaker of these sublime words."^[29] Stier proceeds to explain the sense of Jesus' statement that He is "the resurrection and the life," saying: "He that believeth on Me—this is His meaning—shall receive at once, in and through this faith, in Me, a life which death cannot invade and destroy; just as, and because, it will be demonstrated that I am *the life* by My conflict with death and victorious resurrection."^[30] F. F. Bruce concurs that Jesus' statement "I am the resurrection" (Jn. 11:25) refers not merely to resurrection in general, but specifically to His own resurrection. Bruce writes: "This is more than an announcement of the general resurrection on the last day; this looks forward to Jesus' own rising from the dead and affirms that believers in him, being united to him by faith, will share his risen life even though they experience bodily death."^[31]

Actually, Jesus' statement to Martha in John 11:25 is perfectly consistent with Paul's preaching in Acts 17 of these same basic facts. And the response of the

listeners also shows that they needed more information because they were confused as to the true identity of who Paul was preaching. As to this, Acts 17:18 says that "some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were conversing with him [i.e., with Paul]. And some were saying, 'What would this idle babler wish to say?' Others, 'He seems to be a proclaimer of strange deities,'—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection." [32] The phrase in Acts 17:18, "the resurrection," signifies Jesus' own resurrection (cf. NLT, "his resurrection"), as NT scholars affirm. [33] And so we see at least two things here: (1) Paul's saving message included Jesus' resurrection (2) The unsaved were confused about the identity of "Jesus" because they did not have enough information in order to correctly identify Him as the Christ, the Son of God.

John 20:30-31 – *"And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name."* Clearly the apostle John is giving context to who "Jesus" is, by saying that he wrote his Gospel for the purpose of identifying Jesus as the Christ. So again, this seems to disprove the minimalist saving message that is touted by the Grace Evangelical Society, in that John's statement here proves my point that a lost person needs to be given enough information and context in order to arrive at the correct identity of "Jesus". The GES folks will no doubt respond by saying that the added information is helpful but not absolutely necessary. In response to that I would say that clearly it is necessary to believe in, for example, Jesus' deity, not only because this is the plain meaning of "the Christ, the Son of God" in John 20:31 (i.e. "the Son of God" = God the Son, cf. Matt. 16:16), but also because Jesus Himself made this clear earlier in John's Gospel when He said, "Unless you believe that I AM, you will die in your sins" (Jn. 8:24). When Jesus said that they must believe that He is the "I AM" (cf. Jn. 8:58-59), it is an unmistakable reference to Exodus 3:14, where God tells Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." So John 20:30-31 requires a lost person to believe more than the minimalist GES "saving message," is my point. [34]

Concluding Thoughts

My aim in writing this paper is to help people see that "the saving message" of the Grace Evangelical Society is not specific enough to correctly define who "Jesus" is and what He promises. More information is needed in order to prevent someone from believing in the wrong "Jesus" for "eternal life" (which Satan also

promises, see Gen. 3:4; cf. Matt. 24:24). Out of context, the name "Jesus" and the promise of "eternal life" merely become placeholders waiting to be filled by the unsaved hearers' own "vain imaginations" (Rom. 1:21, KJV) or "futile speculations" (NASB). And as someone has well said, "Belief and trust in a Jesus of the imagination does not save!"[35]

In an attempt to make the gospel simple, the GES has gone to an unbiblical extreme. They have stripped the saving message of its saving power: "Christ crucified" (see 1 Cor. 1:17-2:5). This is truly a tragedy! My hope and prayer is that "perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will" (2 Tim. 2:25b-26, NASB).

In the New Testament, the apostles did not merely tell sinners to believe in a name. They proclaimed Christ crucified, buried, risen, and seen. That is the gospel through which God has saved multitudes throughout church history, and it remains the power of God unto salvation today.

References:

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

[2] New Testament scholar F. F. Bruce affirms: "Paul was but repeating what he had received from those who were in Christ before him when he delivered to the people of Corinth 'as of first importance' the good news of Christ's death, burial, and variously attested resurrection. 1 Cor. xv. 3 ff." (Bruce, "When is a Gospel Not a Gospel?" *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 45.2 [March 1963]: p. 324. Note: The reference to 1 Cor. 15:3ff is cited in the footnotes. Cf. James Denney, *Jesus and the Gospel*, pp. 102-103. The Christian apologist Lee Strobel explains from Paul's writings how this creed from 1 Corinthians 15 goes back to the very beginnings of the church. Concerning this, Strobel says: "Another one is 1 Corinthians chapter 15 verses 3 and following, that contains the essence of Christianity: that Jesus died. Why? 'for our sins,' 'that He was buried,' 'that He was resurrected on the third day,' and then it mentions specific eye-witnesses whose lives were transformed by encountering the resurrected Jesus. This creed

has been dated back by scholars from a wide range of theological belief, to as early as 24 to 36 months after the life of Jesus, and the beliefs that make up that creed go right back to the cross itself. Friends, we don't have some huge expanse of time during which a mortal Jesus was mythologized into being the Son of God. Right back at the beginning, we have historical records that confirm, in the most exalted terms, that Jesus Christ is divine. Remember what I said about A. N. Sherwin-White, 'The passage of two generations of time is not even enough for legend to grow up and wipe out a solid core of historical truth.' We don't have the passage of two generations of time. We have a news flash from ancient history!" (Strobel, "The Case for Christ from Early Recorded Accounts," YouTube, timestamp: 5:31-6:35 minutes.)

[3] Eusebius, *Church History*, Book 6, Chapter 14, sections 6 and 7, ellipsis added.

[4] D. L. Moody, *Pleasure and Profit in Bible Study* (Chicago: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1895), p. 74.

[5] W. Graham Scroggie, *Know Your Bible: A Guide To The Gospels* (London: Pickering & Inglis Ltd., 1948, 1967), p. 548, ellipsis his.

[6] Abdu H. Murray, *Apocalypse Later* (Grand Rapids, Kregel Publications, 2009), p. 111. Dr. Henry Morris likewise affirms: "A gospel without the cross and empty tomb has no power." (Henry Morris, "The Gospel We Are Called to Preach," *Acts & Facts* [April 2020], p. 22.) Caldwell has well said: "Christianity without the cross is false Christianity, and a gospel without the cross is a false gospel. John Stott says it well when he says, 'There is then, it is safe to say, no Christianity without the cross. If the cross is not central to our religion, ours is not the religion of Jesus.' If we are giving people hope in the name of Jesus, without the cross, we are giving people false hope. And this is surely one of the greatest acts of cruelty." (John Caldwell, *Radical Church: A Call to Rediscover the Radical Roots of the Christian Faith*, p. 128.)

[7] Zane Hodges, "The Spirit of Antichrist: Decoupling Jesus from the Christ," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* (Autumn 2007), p. 41.

[8] William R. Newell, *Romans Verse-By-Verse*, p. 20, emphasis his.

[9] Ibid., p. 21.

[10] Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT), p. 724.

[11] Commenting on 2 Corinthians 6:17, the Plymouth Brethren author and biblical scholar William Kelly aptly writes: "The apologist for ecclesiastical antinomianism [i.e., church compromise, where Christians tolerate false doctrine under the guise of grace] argues that the apostle is actually speaking of heathen impurity. Granted: it was the unclean thing there and then; but he was led by the Spirit to write with such breadth and depth as to cover everything that defiles. Is it meant that uncleanness is now consecrated or ignored? Is it denied that evil is most of all evil when coupled with the name of the Lord Jesus? Is not such an association the deceit, power, and triumph of the wicked one? To cleanse ourselves from every pollution is our clear and habitual duty as God's temple and family." (Kelly, *Notes on the Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, p. 145.) Commenting on the same text, Charles Ryrie affirms: "Personal separation involves not being unequally yoked (v. 14); not loving the world (1 John 2:15-17), though using it (1 Cor. 7:31); not having fellowship with sinning brethren (1 Cor. 5:11); and, on the positive side, exhibiting Christlikeness." (Ryrie, *The Ryrie Study Bible, Expanded Edition* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1995], p. 1854, brackets added.) Note: On 1 Cor. 5:11, also see: Matt. 18:15-17; Rom. 16:17; 1 Cor. 5:12, 11:19; 2 Thess. 3:14-15; Titus 3:10-11.

[12] For my specific rebuttal to Hodges' "Deserted Island Scenario" and also a similar scenario that was proposed by another non-traditional Free Grace teacher, see my series of articles titled "The Dangers of the Deserted Island Scenarios, Parts 1-10" (FGFS, Sept. 11, 2012).

<https://freegracefreespeech.blogspot.com/2012/09/some-have-suffered-shipwreck-parts-1-10.html/>.

[13] D. Boring, comment on Zane Hodges, "Zane Hodges Comments on the Practice of Requiring the Doctrinal Assent to Christ's Deity as a Condition of Eternal Life" (March 30, 2012), *Free Grace Theology* blog. April 16, 2012, 4:34 p.m. Note: In addition to italics, the original comment was also in bold print.

<https://free-grace.blogspot.com/2012/03/zane-hodges-comments-on-practice-of.html/>.

[14] Another reference to a sinful "Jesus" might be found in Paul's writings, when as a warning to the Corinthian believers he says: "if he who comes preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached, or if you receive a different spirit which you have not received, or a different gospel which you have not accepted—you may well put up with it!" (2 Cor. 11:4, NKJV).

[15] D. Boring, comment on Zane Hodges, "Zane Hodges Comments on the Practice of Requiring the Doctrinal Assent to Christ's Deity as a Condition of Eternal Life" (March 30, 2012), *Free Grace Theology* blog. April 14, 2012, 9:10 p.m.

<https://free-grace.blogspot.com/2012/03/zane-hodges-comments-on-practice-of.html/>.

[16] Zane Hodges, "Email Correspondence of Antonio da Rosa with Zane C. Hodges," in "Zane Hodges Comments on the Practice of Requiring the Doctrinal Assent to Christ's Deity as a Condition of Eternal Life" (March 30, 2012), *Free Grace Theology* blog.

<https://free-grace.blogspot.com/2012/03/zane-hodges-comments-on-practice-of.html/>.

[17] This is the claim of Zane Hodges. For example, he says: "It is the name of Jesus that brings salvation whenever anyone believes in that name as his or her sure hope of eternal well-being." (Hodges, "How To Lead People To Christ, Part 1: The Content of Our Message," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* [Autumn 2000], p. 5.)

[18] D. Boring, comment on Zane Hodges, "Zane Hodges Comments on the Practice of Requiring the Doctrinal Assent to Christ's Deity as a Condition of Eternal Life" (March 30, 2012), *Free Grace Theology* blog. April 14, 2012, 9:10 p.m.

<https://free-grace.blogspot.com/2012/03/zane-hodges-comments-on-practice-of.html/>.

[19] D. Boring, comment on Zane Hodges, "Zane Hodges Comments on the Practice of Requiring the Doctrinal Assent to Christ's Deity as a Condition of

Eternal Life" (March 30, 2012), *Free Grace Theology* blog. April 15, 2012, 8:44 p.m.
<https://free-grace.blogspot.com/2012/03/zane-hodges-comments-on-practice-of.html/>.

[20] Cf. "Satan Goes To Church," pilgrimtractsociety.org.

[21] Zane Hodges, "How To Lead People To Christ, Part 1: The Content of Our Message," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* (Autumn 2000), p. 5.

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 4.

[23] James Moffatt, "The Formation of the New Testament," in *The Abingdon Bible Commentary*, p. 856.

[24] Zane Hodges, "How To Lead People To Christ, Part 1: The Content of Our Message," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* (Autumn 2000), p. 5.

[25] Charlie Bing, "The Condition for Salvation in John's Gospel," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* (Spring 1996), p. 34.

[26] Fred Lybrand, "GES Gospel: Lybrand Open Letter," p. 21, emphasis his. Note: In the original article the word "except" was misspelled "accept". I corrected it to the current spelling.

[27] Murray J. Harris, *John*, EGGNT, p. 213. Note: I transcribed the Greek words in Harris' original statement into English. Commenting on the same statement of Jesus in John 11:25, F. F. Bruce similarly states: "It seems that the two statements made by Jesus after his claim to be the resurrection and the life, while parallel, are not synonymous." (Bruce, *The Gospel of John*, p. 244.)

[28] John H. Niemelä, "The Cross in John's Gospel," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* (Spring 2003), p. 24, italics his.

[29] Rudolf Stier, *The Words of the Lord Jesus*, Vol. 6, p. 27, ellipsis added.

[30] *Ibid.*, p. 30, emphasis his.

[31] F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John*, p. 244.

[32] Commenting on Acts 17:18, Albert Barnes writes: "*And the resurrection*. The resurrection of Jesus, and through him the resurrection of the dead." (Barnes, *Notes on the New Testament: Acts*, p. 258.)

[33] Meyer observes: "Paul doubtless announced *who* would raise the dead." (H. A. W. Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook on the New Testament, The Acts of the Apostles*, Vol. II, p. 109, emphasis his.) R. J. Knowling in *The Expositor's Greek Testament* affirms: "[Paul's] address itself shows that the Apostle spoke of the resurrection of Jesus as affording a pledge of a general resurrection." (Knowling, W. R. Nicoll, Editor, *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, Vol. II, p. 368, brackets added.)

[34] For more information, see my article "Three Resurrection Signs of the Savior: A Study in the Gospel of John" (November 2007).

[35] jazzycat, comment on Jonathan Moorehead, "Is This Heresy?," *theocentriblog* (May 20, 2008). May 20, 2008, 9:20 p.m.
<https://web.archive.org/web/20111122105348/http://jmoorhead.blogspot.com/2008/05/is-this-heresy.html/>.

Posted by Jonathan Perreault