

What Is the “Crossless” Gospel? Part 1

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By Lou Martuneac

Purpose:

The purpose of this article is two-fold. The goals are to:

1) Define the teaching of an interpretation of the Gospel that has come to be known as the “Crossless” gospel.

2) To help readers to gain enough understanding about this teaching so that it can be recognized and refuted.

At the outset I want to encourage Evangelists and Pastors to read this series understanding that this is an important doctrinal matter and we need to be aware. In my opinion, you will come to appreciate the gravity of this doctrinal issue as you read through the article.

Defining the Crossless Gospel:

The Crossless gospel is an interpretation of God’s redemptive plan for mankind that can be summed up as follows: The lost man simply needs to believe a man named Jesus guarantees eternal life, and by believing nothing more than that he (the lost man) is born again. The lost man does not need to understand or believe that he is a Hell-deserving sinner under the wrath of God. The lost man does not need to know, understand or believe who Jesus is and what He did to provide salvation. Furthermore, Crossless advocates believe a lost man can openly reject the Lord’s Deity, but still be born again.

If you are like me, at first glance you would think this could not possibly be a position on the Gospel held by any Bible-believing pastor or teacher. That is what I initially thought. In April 2006, however, excerpts from a two-part series by Zane Hodges were forwarded to me. After reading that series, plus further research and interaction with certain individuals I found the above is indeed the position of a certain segment of evangelical believers.

In my Christian experience I have never encountered an interpretation of the Gospel, in evangelical circles, that is as reductionist and non-saving a message as the Crossless gospel.

History & Background:

Portions of what I am going to share in the following paragraphs of this section have flown pretty much under the radar of the Independent Fundamental Baptist (IFB) movement.

With the release of Dr. John MacArthur's *The Gospel According to Jesus* (1988), a debate and controversy broke out across a broad spectrum of evangelical Christianity over the definition and terms of the Gospel. The position articulated by Dr. MacArthur came to be known as Lordship Salvation. Up until MacArthur's book came out the debate over Lordship Salvation was conducted under the general radar, and essentially limited to pastors, commentators, theologians and Bible college dorm rooms. Because John MacArthur was such a well known and generally respected pastor/teacher his book *The Gospel According to Jesus* generated a ground swell of interest among a great many believers who were hitherto unaware of the controversy over the Lordship interpretation of the Gospel.

Men in evangelical and fundamental circles, who rejected MacArthur's Lordship interpretation of the Gospel, began to respond. In Fundamentalist circles for example, Dr. Ernest Pickering wrote, *Lordship Salvation: An Examination of John MacArthur's Book, The Gospel According to Jesus*. Although brief, it is, in my opinion, a must read and a very helpful examination of MacArthur's book. Dr. Pickering's review is available through Baptist World Mission, Decatur, AL. Men from another segment of evangelical Christianity also began writing in response to the Lordship interpretation of the Gospel. Zane Hodges, Bob Wilkin, Mike Cocoris, and to a lesser extent, Charles Ryrie, were among those writing from an opposing position.

In 1986 the Grace Evangelical Society (GES) was founded. The GES was initially made up of men who would identify themselves as part of the Free Grace (FG) community. Among them would be notables, such as Hodges, Cocoris, Ryrie and the founder and current Executive Director of the GES, Bob Wilkin. Upon the release of MacArthur's *The Gospel According to Jesus*, the GES became the most vocal and prolific opposing voice. The *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* began in 1988 and has since published dozens of theological articles, many in response to the Lordship Salvation interpretation of the Gospel.

For nearly 15 years the membership of the GES had been in a relatively harmonious relationship. In recent years, however, a fracture has developed within the Free Grace community. That fracture is widening over a dispute on the content of the Gospel. The nature of that debate has implications for a broad spectrum of evangelical Christianity, including Independent Fundamental Baptist (IFB) circles.

What is the Crux of the Debate?

The crux of the debate is NOT over the personal doctrinal beliefs of Crossless gospel advocates. The controversy does not revolve around what they think was necessary to make it possible for the lost to be born again. The major concern I have, the focal point and crux of the controversy is over what Zane Hodges and Bob Wilkin believe is two-fold. First, what is the bare minimum necessary for the lost person to believe to receive the gift of eternal life. Second, what these men believe the lost man does not have to know, understand or believe and still can be born again.

Why is the Free Grace Community Fractured?

The answer to that question is the subject matter that leads to our definition of what has come to be known as the Crossless gospel.

Shortly after the inception of the GES many men in the FG community either joined or would identify themselves with the GES. (I am not aware of any IFB preachers who joined or are current members of the GES.) In the beginning, unity among GES members largely revolved around a desire to resist Lordship Salvation, and its advocates, such as John MacArthur, Walter Chantry, John Stott and Kenneth L. Gentry. Their primary goal, however, has been to promote a Free Grace view of theology, but especially of the Gospel.

One man I recently interacted with said, "I don't like the trend that is developing in the FG movement of rejecting the old time Evangelical faith." This wasn't the first time, and won't be the last that an individual did not realize that the FG movement has been fractured. There exist today two distinct groups within the FG community.

The GES and its sympathizers constantly try to portray themselves and their teaching as though it is representative of the FG movement as a whole. This is untrue. They are at, and continue to move further in a doctrinal direction that has isolated them far outside the mainstream of the FG community. It is the Hodges/Wilkin/GES faction in the FG community around which the controversy revolves. Because the GES has departed from a balanced biblical view of the Gospel it has become an extremist faction in the FG community. The GES is as extreme in the FG community as the hyper-Calvinistic and/or double predestination elements are in Reformed circles.

Recent firsthand reports from former members of the GES indicate that many Free Grace men have resigned and/or distanced themselves from the GES. Many doctrinally balanced pastors in the FG

community will no longer identify with the GES. The escalation of departures from the GES has been motivated primarily by Zane Hodges and Bob Wilkin having shifted their position on three major doctrinal areas. They are: Repentance, the Gospel, and the Deity of Christ: His titles, “the Christ” and “the Son of God.”

Each of these shifts to what are current GES theological positions originated with the teaching of Zane Hodges. We are going to take a brief look at each of these doctrines as they are taught by Zane Hodges, Bob Wilkin and select others in the GES camp.

Repentance

Men on both sides of the Lordship Salvation debate agree repentance has a role in salvation. They disagree, some sharply, on the exact role and definition of repentance, but agree repentance is involved in the salvation experience. Zane Hodges and Bob Wilkin are, however, notable exceptions to this general consensus on repentance.

Most men in IFB circles recognize that Hodges has held what some called a “weak view” on repentance for many years. Very few, however, realize Hodges has drifted much further. The teaching of Hodges and Wilkin entirely eliminates repentance toward God from salvation. They believe repentance is not a condition for salvation. Hodges rejects the commonly held, “change of mind” definition of repentance. Hodges and Wilkin totally dismiss repentance, by any definition, as a condition for salvation. This teaching can be found in Zane Hodges’ books *Absolutely Free* and more pointedly in *Harmony With God*.

For example Hodges wrote, “Thank God there is only one answer to the question, ‘What must I do to be saved?’ That, of course, is the answer not only of Paul and all the apostles, but of Jesus Himself. The answer is: ‘believe!’ Repentance is not part of that answer. It never has been and never will be....I myself once held the ‘change of mind’ view of repentance and taught it. But the Scriptures have persuaded me otherwise.” (*Harmony With God*, p. 123.)

The Gospel

There have been two ways the GES has dealt with “the Gospel.” In both cases the GES distorts the term “the Gospel.” They are as follows:

1) To claim the lost do need to believe “the Gospel,” but that there is a fuller version of the gospel (including Christ’s death and resurrection) for sanctification. They also see a mini version of “the Gospel” that only includes the promise of eternal life which is all that the lost need to believe.

2) To claim that “the gospel” is just a word for “good news” and this word does not have a technical application in Scripture to the specific message the lost need to believe to be saved. Some Crossless advocates say the Gospel could be the entire New Testament or Old and New Testaments.

My observations find that there are elements of both positions in the GES camp. However, it appears like the majority is leaning toward this second argument.

Zane Hodges seems to believe the sacrificial death, burial and resurrection should be included in a Gospel presentation. He also teaches, however, it is not necessary for lost men to understand or believe in the finished work of Christ, or His Deity, to be born again. According to Hodges, and Crossless advocates, to be born again a lost man must only believe that Jesus guarantees eternal life to those who believe in Him for it.

This teaching is found in an article by Hodges and is available through the GES website titled, “How to Lead People to Christ,” Part 1 & 2. Following are excerpts:

“People are not saved by believing that Jesus died on the cross; they are saved by believing in Jesus for eternal life . . . Let us always point men to Christ Himself as the object of faith, rather than to some concept that must be theologically clarified before it can really be understood.... You see, as we noted previously, the facts surrounding the gospel message—such as the death and resurrection of Christ—are important facts for what they tell us about the reasons for trusting Christ. But believing these facts doesn’t save anyone. People are only saved when they believe that Jesus gives them eternal life the moment they believe in Him for that. The simple truth is that Jesus can be believed for eternal salvation apart from any detailed knowledge of what He did to provide it.” (*Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 14:1, Spring 2001.)

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“In recent years I have become aware of a way of presenting the gospel invitation that troubles me. I believe I have heard it from my earliest years, and I admit it didn’t really bother me for a long time. Now it does. I have heard people say this: ‘In order to be saved you must believe that Jesus died on the cross.’ In the context of our present discussion, I mean that this is their summary of the requirement of

faith. It is not just one item, among others, to be believed. Whenever I hear that nowadays, I get extremely uncomfortable.” (“How to Lead People to Christ, Pt. 2,” *JOTGES* 14, Spring 2001.)

“The simple truth is that Jesus can be believed for eternal salvation apart from any detailed knowledge of what He did to provide it.” (“How to Lead People to Christ, Pt. 2,” *JOTGES* 14:1, Spring 2001.)

“I now realize that no one is saved by praying a prayer. They are saved when they understand God’s offer of eternal life through Jesus and believe it. That’s when people are saved. And that’s the only time when people are saved. All of the excess baggage that we bring into our encounter with unsaved sinners is just that, excess baggage!” (“How to Lead People to Christ, Pt. 2,” *JOTGES* 14:1, Spring 2001.)

What is this “excess baggage” Hodges refers to when encountering the unsaved? John 20:31, is a verse Hodges quotes in Part 1 of his series.

“But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through His name” (John 20:31).

This passage includes one of the necessary beliefs that Hodges calls “excess baggage,” namely, the Deity of Christ! Hodges and the GES, however, have negated belief in the Deity of Christ from this passage. How this is done will be discussed in the next section.

Does Bob Wilkin view Jesus Christ as a necessary object of faith for salvation? He makes statements that include Jesus Christ as a sort of co-object of faith alongside the promise of eternal life. Following are quotes from Wilkin which seem to indicate that the object of faith for salvation can be no more than the promise of Jesus to give eternal life.

“In the course of my message I indicated that [the] object of saving faith was not the cross per se, but the promise of Jesus that the one who simply believes in Him has everlasting life. I said that the cross explains how Jesus can fulfill the promise and who it is that makes the promise, but that a person could believe in the cross and not be born again. We must believe Jesus’ promise to be regenerate.” (“Justification by Faith Alone Is an Essential Part of the Gospel,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*, Autumn 2005.)

“When you tell people about Jesus’ death and resurrection, don’t stop there. Go on to tell them that all who simply believe in Him have everlasting life. He is able to fulfill that promise because of His death and resurrection. But call people to believe the promise. When we believe in Jesus, we believe in His promise of everlasting life to the believer. The true object of saving faith is the faith-alone-in-Christ-alone message.” (Ibid.)

“The object of faith which results in life eternal is the promise of God to the believer. God promises eternal life to all who rely on Jesus and Him alone for it: ‘He who believes in Me has everlasting life’.” (“Do Demons Really Believe?” *Grace in Focus* newsletter, Nov. - Dec. 1992.)

In Wilkins’s statements there are no clear mentions of the Lord Jesus Christ being the necessary object of faith, only the promise of Jesus. Crossless advocates teach that the lost can be saved by faith in a promise of eternal life apart from understanding or believing who the Guarantor of the promise is and what He did to provide salvation. In the next section we are going to find that the GES insists a lost man can believe in a promise from who he believes is a non-Deity, cultic Jesus.

How does Bob Wilkin define his stance on the cross, resurrection and Deity of Christ? Bob Wilkin has stated more than once that his version of the Gospel is the only one, and all others are false. Wilkin debated Dr. Darrell Bock (Dallas Seminary professor) several years ago. On page 30 of the debate transcript a member from the audience asked Wilkin if “his gospel” is “the exclusive gospel.” Wilkin responds in the affirmative. The questioner presses him further, asking, “So therefore any one who is not adhering to the free grace gospel, in your opinion, would fall under the anathema of Galatians 1?”

Now, obviously this person is asking about “free grace” in general, but in context he is referring to whatever Wilkin believes is “the Gospel.” In Wilkins’s opening statement of this debate he indicated that the statement “faith alone saves, but the faith that saves is not alone” is not the Gospel. So this question references Wilkins’s specific position on “the Gospel.”

Wilkins’s answer: “Yes. In terms of the anathema of Galatians 1, my view is, any one who is proclaiming a false gospel ... a person hypothetically could believe a false gospel and not proclaim it. But if they’re proclaiming a false gospel, they fall under the curse, which I take it is the curse of God which falls upon the life of someone here and now. It’s not like the NIV translates it, ‘let him be eternally condemned.’ That’s not a translation; that’s an interpretation. It simply says anathema; let him be under the curse of God. And so I take it what that means is if I know someone that’s proclaiming a false gospel, I don’t send money into their ministry, I don’t pray for God to bless their ministry. Instead I pray for God to bring them back to the true gospel.”

At a 2007 GES conference Wilkin announced that he had undergone a change of his views concerning “the Gospel.” He stated that he believes the term “the Gospel” is NEVER used for the message the lost must believe to be saved!

Wilkin also states, “What they fail to understand is that biblical faith in Jesus is not faith that He existed, nor faith in His Deity, nor even faith that He died for our sins and rose again. In the Bible, to believe in Jesus is to be convinced that He who died and rose again guarantees eternal life to all who simply believe in Him.” (Bob Wilkin, *Secure and Sure*.)

At first glance, Wilkins's statement above seems reasonable. Then, however, we have the following statement, which negates what might have been considered orthodox in the previous. "Jesus made it clear that the only condition [for salvation] is being convinced that He guarantees eternal life to all who believe in Him. Add anything to that and you have a different gospel." (Bob Wilkin, *JOTGES*, Autumn, 1998.)

Wilkin considers calling for understanding and belief in the finished work of Christ, His resurrection, and Deity, a "different gospel." His meaning and intent is clear. In his opinion, to preach the necessity of belief in the finished work and deity of Christ is to preach a false Gospel through unnecessary additions.

Former GES staff member Jeremy Myers wrote, "I have a view that one does not have to believe in the death and resurrection of Jesus to be born again." (*Pursuit of Truth* blog, Nov. 6, 2007.)

As you interact with and read the advocates of the Crossless gospel, you learn a great deal about what they consider false, unnecessary additions to what a lost man must believe for the reception of eternal life. While these men personally believe in the finished work of Christ (and His Deity), from the few examples above, one can certainly see that, in an evangelistic setting with the lost, they deny these truths [are necessary content of saving faith] on a practical level.