

MESSAGE ON TARGET The Saving Message is Good News; Not All Good News is the Saving Message!

In *Grace in Focus*, September/October 2009 and November/December 2009, Bob Wilkin, Founder of Grace Evangelical Society, responded to both J. B. Hixson¹ and Jonathan Perreault² who objected to being classified with a *five-essentials* and a *six-essentials* approach to the gospel. There was never the intention to misrepresent anyone, rather to illustrate differing presentations of the gospel message. Nevertheless, both Hixson and Perreault understand the saving message to extend beyond simply *believing in Christ for eternal life* (Jn. 3:16).

Which Gospel Message?

The chart, *The Good News*, illustrates the various ways the gospel or good news is identified in the New Testament. How one views each of these items is critical to understanding what comprises the gospel message of salvation.



In or Out

Perreault appeals exclusively to 1 Corinthians 15 for the gospel message, citing *four elements or components*: Christ (1) died, (2) was buried, (3) was raised and (4) appeared to many.³ Perreault's list corresponds to Items 2–5 on the chart. On the other hand, Hixson picks and chooses from various passages composing one propositional statement, which includes *five core essentials*: (1) Jesus Christ, (2) the Son of God who died and rose again, (3) to pay one's personal penalty for sin, (4) gives eternal life to all who trust Him and (5) Him alone for it.⁴ At least, Items 1, 2, & 4 are represented in Hixson's approach.

But why isn't Christ's birth in Bethlehem, numbers 6 and 7, included? Christ's birthplace is even a fulfillment of prophecy (Mic. 5:2). If Christ died, isn't it just as important that He was born? Isn't that what Christmas is all about? If Paul's declaration of the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15 is critical, why isn't his gospel teaching of God's justification and sanctification (Items 8 & 9) in Romans just as important? In addition, why would the gospel of the kingdom of God (10) be excluded? Jesus Himself spoke of that gospel. Let's not forget that many also assume that Christ's virgin birth and His deity must also be included in a gospel message.

So, which is it? If some gospel items are necessary inclusions, why are not all of them necessary? Aren't they all good news? How does one decide which ones should or shouldn't comprise the gospel message?

The Case for Continued Communication

Both Hixson and Perreault appeal to progressive revelation to substantiate their own particular selection of ingredients for "a gospel message." Each concludes that post-cross evidence *must always* be included since the four Gospels are evidently insufficient. I continue to wait for someone to explain to me why John takes time to explain a future work of the Spirit prior to the cross, but fails to inform us concerning a supposedly post-cross change in the actual saving message. You remember. John pens his Gospel many years after Christ's death and resurrection. In John 7:39, he took time to clarify Christ's "rivers-of-living-water" teaching to refer to the future ministry of the Spirit. The purpose of the explanation was to keep us from being confused. Yet, there is not a hint from the beloved disciple anywhere to indicate that the saving message had actually changed since Christ's time on earth. Wouldn't that be very important to know if indeed it had changed? Doesn't it appear strange the John takes time to explain one issue, but fails to inform us about a change in the actual message of salvation. It seems John wrote and taught a saving message which had not changed.

The Case for Content

As previously mentioned, both Hixson and Perreault identify the *five core essentials* or the *four elements* as the substance of faith to be believed for salvation.⁵ Christ, the object of saving faith, is merged together with His works (Christ's death, resurrection, etc.) to create this prescribed *content of faith*. Christ's works are propositional truths, which authenticates Him as the saving object. Those truths are supporting evidence for belief in Christ as Savior. To bundle the object of saving faith together with the supporting evidence and then call it the "content of faith" or an *enlarged "object of faith"*⁶ is unfounded and fallacious. In fact, the "content-of-faith" terminology is a misnomer. Faith has no content. Faith is merely a persuasion, a reliance on the object of faith. The only biblical object of saving faith is Christ alone.

The Case for Context

Contending that the meaning of good news (gospel) differs from context to context, Hixson understands the good news "in 1 Corinthians 15:1-8 appears to be broader than the precise content of saving faith."⁷ While Hixson picks and chooses different texts to supply the content of faith, Perreault focuses exclusively on 1 Corinthians 15:3-5 for the gospel message.⁸ This contextual focus, however, poses a problem. The question should be asked, "What good news is addressed and why?" Providing a clue, verses 1-2 of 1 Corinthians read,

Now, I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain.

Written to believers, the text indicates that salvation is conditioned upon "holding fast

the word.” Proponents of Reformed theology tell us that continual obedience *proves* salvation. On the other hand, continual “holding fast” *sustains* salvation for the Arminian position. Both views clash with the Free Grace understanding that salvation is *secured* and eternally settled by faith alone in Christ alone. Nevertheless, the better explanation for “saved” in this context concerns deliverance from the power of sin or sanctification.⁹ Rather than securing one’s eternal destiny, *resurrection living* with a view to that future physical reality is this salvation emphasis.¹⁰ The good news and central issue in Chapter 15 is the reaffirmation of the importance of Christ’s resurrection and, therefore, the believer’s future resurrection, not the message of eternal life. Countering the denial of future bodily resurrections, Paul argues that Christ’s resurrection (vv. 3-11) contradicts any denial of the believer’s resurrection (vv. 12-19), bolsters the believer’s hope (vv. 20-34), and illustrates the coming transformation (vv. 35-50). While verses 3-5 address various aspects of the good news, the resurrection, not the saving message, is the reason for Paul’s instruction in that passage. Correction and edification for believers was the intent, rather than the saving message.

What Message Saves?

Addressing the Jerusalem Council, Peter says, “by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe” (Acts 15:7). Acts 10:34-43 provides the good news Peter delivered to those unbelievers: (1) baptism by John, v. 37; (2) miracles of Jesus, v. 38; (3) Christ’s death, v. 39; (4) Christ’s resurrection, v. 40; (5) Christ’s appearances to many, v. 41; (6) Jesus appointed Judge, v. 42; and (7) individuals must believe in Him, v. 43. Notice that Christ’s baptism and miracles, along with being the Judge, are not found on *The Good News* chart provided. Adding three more means we are up to at least fifteen items listed as “good news” in the Scriptures.

While our emphasis to this point has been “a gospel message,” I believe our central focus in evangelism should be “the saving message.” I am suggesting “a good news message” may address any number of particular good news items, but “the best news message” for an unbeliever is “the saving message.” This was exactly Peter’s approach in Acts 10. Let me be clear. Peter mentioned six good news items to his Gentile audience before bringing them to focus on the primary issue, the saving message—*believe in Christ* (v. 43).

Making a Distinction between Christ & His Works

A distinction between faith in Christ and faith in His works provides perspective. “The saving message” concerns the only saving object, Jesus Christ. While “a good news message” may include any number of supporting items or evidence (e.g., birth, death, resurrection, etc) that authenticates the object, the core focus of such a message must be on the necessity of believing in the only saving object. Isn’t that the way Peter used “good news” to substantiate the required belief in the “really good news” for salvation?

To merge and confuse the supporting evidence with the Person of Christ blurs the *only condition* for saving faith—to *simply believe in Christ for eternal life* (Jn. 3:16; 6:47). Christ’s death for our sins is good news, but belief in Christ’s death for our sins does not save anyone. That goes for each of the other supporting evidence (Items 2 through 10) on the chart. Even belief in a bundling of several items together does not provide for salvation. The only message that saves is to believe in Christ for eternal life.

Context is Key

It is interesting that John does not even mention the term *gospel* in the Gospel of John. Nevertheless, in his book, we do find Jesus explaining the way of salvation to the unsaved. Differing from the context of 1 Corinthians 15, which exhorts and edifies believers, Christ’s encounter with Nicodemus provides the really good news he needed to hear. The saving message is to believe in Christ for eternal life (Jn. 3:16). Nothing else is required.

Hitting the Bull’s-Eye

The fifteen plus items discussed are of critical importance to the Christian faith. Each is good news, but only “the saving message” makes the good news into the best news for the unsaved!

Endnotes

1. In the September/October 2009, *Grace in Focus*, Bob Wilkin addressed J. B. Hixson's objection to being classified with a *five-essentials* approach to the gospel.
2. In the November/December 2009, *Grace in Focus*, Bob Wilkin addressed Jonathan Perreault's objection to being classified with a *six-essentials* approach to the gospel.
3. Jonathan Perreault, *Getting the Gospel Right* (Free Grace Free Speech Blog, 2009), p. 13.
4. J.B. Hixson, *Getting the Gospel Wrong* (Xulon Press, 2008), p. 100.
5. Hixson, *Getting the Gospel Wrong*, p. 147; Perreault, *Getting the Gospel Right*, p. 1.
6. Hixson, *Getting the Gospel Wrong*, pp. 84, 147.

Hixson writes (p. 147), *The phrases "object of faith" and "content of faith" sometimes are used interchangeably...One cannot trust in a person (i.e., "object") without believing specific propositional truths made by or about that person (i.e., "content")*.

He indicates (p. 84), *The object of saving faith necessarily involves both personal trust in Jesus as Savior, as well as the acceptance of certain propositional truths about Him*.

7. Hixson, *Getting the Gospel Wrong*, p. 79.
8. Perreault, *Getting the Gospel Right*, p. 4.
9. Bob Wilkin, "'Salvation' by Perseverance to 'Paul's Gospel,'" *Grace in Focus* (GES, Nov./Dec., 2009), pp. 1-2; Bob Wilkin, "Another Look at 1 Corinthians 15:3-11," *Grace in Focus* (GES, Jan./Feb., 2008), pp. 1-2; Jeremy Myers, "The Gospel is More Than 'Faith Alone,'" *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* (GES, Autumn 2009), pp. 47-50; Joseph C. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings* (Haynesville, NC; Schoettle Publishing, 1992), pp. 210-211.
10. Reiterating the centrality of Christ's resurrection, Paul asserts the "first importance" of the progression from Christ's "death," to His "burial," and then to His "resurrection" (1 Cor. 15:3). While bodily resurrection is the primary concern in 1 Corinthians 15:3-50, Paul presents the same death-to-life theme in Romans 6, where the issue is spiritual resurrection. Moving through the identical progression from co-death, to co-burial, and to co-resurrection with Christ (vv. 3-5), Paul substantiates the basis for the believer's resurrection living (v. 11). "Even so consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus." The believer is freed from sin's reign to live in slavery to God (vv. 15-23). Positional freedom from sin's power allows for obedient, resurrection living.