

# What Is The Free-Grace Gospel?

or possibly better

# What Is The Saving Message?

# What You Believe Matters!

Those who claim the name Christian, but have never believed the simple gospel of salvation by grace, have no right to that name.

And by the same token

Those who think themselves Christians but have never understood the gospel offer must also be considered false professors, however sincere they may be in their error. A person cannot believe what he does not know or understand.

Zane Hodges  
*Grace in Eclipse*  
pp. 17-18

# Hodges' Hydra Article



## THE HYDRA'S OTHER HEAD: THEOLOGICAL LEGALISM

by zane c. hodges

In Greek mythology, the Hydra was a multi-headed monster. This monstrosity inhabited the marshes of Lerna near Argos, and one of its heads was immortal. Among the daunting labors of Hercules was the task of killing

the Hydra, a feat made more difficult by the fact that when one head was cut off, two grew in its place! But Hercules eventually accomplished this labor when he severed the immortal head from the Hydra's body!

In the realm of Christian theology, legalism has long been a doctrinal Hydra. Its many "heads" make it truly difficult to defeat and new "heads" can appear without warning. In fact, the battle will not end until the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. But all of the heads of this beast have one feature in common. They deny the truth that eternal life is obtained by simple faith in Jesus and they substitute some form of legalism as a replacement for that truth.

For centuries, the Roman Catholic Church was the most prominent "head" and still retains an extremely high profile. In Catholicism, eternal salvation is not obtained by simply believing in Jesus Christ for eternal life. Instead, adherence to the Church with its many requirements, both doctrinal and practical, is necessary. Catholicism is **ecclesiastical legalism** in a highly developed form.

The cults are also typically legalistic (e.g., Mormonism, Seventh Day Adventism, Jehovah's Witnesses). Access to eternal happiness depends on adherence to whatever the cult prescribes. This may be called **cultic legalism**.

Since at least the days of Theodore Beza (1519-1605 AD), another form of legalism has emerged which maintains that individuals are not eternally saved unless they are submissive to God's commands or laws. This doctrine finds its most popular contemporary expression in what is now called Lordship salvation. For Lordship salvation theologians, there is no salvation through simple faith in Jesus for eternal life. Saving faith necessarily entails and includes full surrender and full commitment to God's will. I call this form of legalism **commitment legalism**.

It must be pointed out that typical Lordship theologians insist that they believe in salvation by faith alone. Not to insist on this would be to give up the sola fide of Reformation doctrine, which most are not willing to do. Instead, they redefine saving faith so that it fits the parameters of their own doctrine. In the process,

biblical faith becomes unrecognizable because in Lordship thought it takes the form of self-surrender instead of simple confidence in Jesus Christ.

More recently another form of legalism—another Hydra head—has achieved a heightened profile. This new "head" maintains that eternal salvation is by "correct doctrinal conviction." It is not enough to simply believe that Jesus Christ gives us eternal life when we believe in Him for that. We must also believe certain orthodox doctrines that go along with such belief. But these doctrines are not in themselves identical with believing in Jesus Christ for eternal life. Instead these beliefs form a kind of checklist that measures the validity of one's faith. I call this form of legalism **theological legalism**. Basically it is salvation for the orthodox!

**Theological legalism** seeks to co-opt Free Grace theology. Indeed, it masquerades as this kind of theology. But this claim is false. Grace is not given freely to the sinner who believes in Jesus for eternal life. Instead, grace is denied to that sinner unless he subscribes to the relevant theological propositions. A recent book entitled *Getting the Gospel Wrong!* prescribes five core essentials that one must believe to get eternal life. If a person fails to believe even one of the five, he has believed a gospel that cannot save him.

But at this point obvious problems emerge. Who determines which theological doctrines are necessary for eternal salvation? The Bible, we are told. But where in the Bible? No single place, we are told. Who then determines what the definitive list contains? The answer, of course, boils down to this: the theological legalist himself! Because if the legalist himself doesn't tell us, no one will ever figure it out!

Some adherents of **theological legalism** claim that 1 Cor 15:1-8 is a key text in their theology. But this claim cannot withstand even superficial scrutiny.

In the realm of Christian theology, legalism has long been a doctrinal Hydra. Its many "heads" make it truly difficult to defeat and new "heads" can appear without warning. In fact, the battle will not end until the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In 1 Cor 15:1-8 Paul is reminding the Christians in Corinth about the content of his gospel. In verse 3 the NKJV reports him, somewhat inaccurately, as saying, "For I delivered to you first of all." "First of all" renders a Greek phrase (*en prōtois*) that ought to be translated "as of first importance" in accordance with the treatment of this phrase in the standard lexicon. BDAG [p. 893] observes: "*en prōtois among the first = most important things, i.e., as of first importance* 1 Cor 15:3." Both NASV and NIV correctly render this Greek phrase "as of first importance."

It is clear, then, that Paul considered the items he enumerated in verses 3b-8 to be items of major importance to his gospel message. These items are:

- (1) "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures" (v. 3b);
- (2) "He was buried" (v. 4a);
- (3) "He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures" (v. 4b);

hydra's other head...continued on page 3

- (4) "He was seen by Cephas" (v. 5a);
- (5) "then by the twelve" (v. 5b);
- (6) "after that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some are fallen asleep" (v. 6);
- (7) "after that he was seen by James" (v. 7);
- (8) "then by all the apostles" (v. 7b);
- (9) "then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time" (v. 8).

Keep in mind that *all* these items were of "first importance" in Paul's gospel. Is it therefore necessary to believe all nine to receive eternal life? So far, I don't know of any theological legalist who claims all nine are necessary. Instead, this type of legalist is reduced to "cherry picking" the items he himself considers of "first importance!" Such a process is self-refuting. It is also arrogant.

A ridiculous error is involved here. Paul is obviously not giving a list of "core essentials" that must be believed in order to be eternally saved. Many of us, however, have been conditioned to think that the term "ἐπίσημος" defines what a person must believe to have eternal life. But 1 Cor 15:1-8 shows this is false. Clearly, for Paul, the term "gospel" is broader than the essential content of saving faith.

In 1 Cor 15:1-8 Paul is giving the informational content of his gospel. On the basis of this vitally important content, he would have expected the Corinthians to believe in Jesus Christ for eternal life. But since they had already done this, he does not mention it here specifically. His gospel is being recalled here because Paul is defending the truth of the resurrection (1 Cor 15:12-58). The items he lists are chosen for that purpose. A failure to see this seriously misunderstands the biblical text.

To make 1 Cor 15:1-8 a touchstone or yardstick for determining the essential content of saving faith is to grossly misuse the biblical text. As a great Bible teacher once said, "A text taken out of its context is a pretext!"

In reality, **theological legalism** is at war with the Gospel of John (as are all the Hydra heads!). Legalists of this type inveigh strongly against what they call the *overuse* or *overemphasis upon* the Fourth Gospel. It is not surprising that they do. The Fourth Gospel stands in obvious contradiction to the tenets of **theological legalism**.

The Fourth Gospel is the work of Jesus' closest disciple, i.e., John the son of Zebedee, who leaned on His breast at the Last Supper. It gives us numerous firsthand reports of Jesus offering eternal life to individuals or crowds. Not once does He preach the conditions required for eternal life by theological legalists. No wonder such legalists are uncomfortable with this Gospel!

**Theological legalism** maintains that the saving message has "changed" since the cross. But John's Gospel was written long after the "changes" these legalists insist on should have been standard fare. Yet the "theological provisos" required by **theological legalism** are absent from the Fourth Gospel, and they cannot be found anywhere in Scripture (not even 1 Cor 15:1-8). The conclusion is irresistible that such "provisos" never existed. John the apostle obviously believed that the message Jesus gave to the lost was sufficient for the present age in which we live. If we do not believe that, we are in conflict with him—and with our Lord. In offering eternal life, Jesus Himself never invited anyone at all to believe in:

- (1) His eternal oneness with the Father and the Holy Spirit;
- (2) His incarnation and virgin birth;

- (3) His sinless and holy life;
- (4) His death on the cross for our sins;
- (5) His bodily resurrection;
- (6) His ascension to the right hand of God;
- (7) His intercessory work as our Great High Priest;
- (8) His Second Coming.

Beyond question, all of these truths are of infinite importance. But Jesus never conditioned eternal life on believing any of them. Neither does the Fourth Gospel. Neither does the entire New Testament. In fact one could believe all eight of the truths listed above and not yet be born again. Believing *all* these truths is not the same as believing in Jesus for eternal life.

The error of **theological legalism** is extremely grave. It communicates to the unsaved person that he can only be saved

if his doctrine is correct, rather than that by simple faith in Christ. Moreover, it subverts the assurance of the saved person by making him wonder, "Did I believe enough doctrine to be truly saved?" Thus the effect of **theological legalism** is essentially the same as that of **commitment legalism**, i.e., of Lordship salvation. Both claim to teach salvation by faith alone, but both actually subvert the biblical gospel.

Jesus always made Himself the object of our faith and offered eternal life freely to anyone who believed in Him, or in His name, for that. John 6:47 is typical of many statements to that effect: "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life" (emphasis added). It is therefore faith in His name, that is, faith in Him, that saves. As Peter states it so well, "Nor 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; emphasis added).

The marvelous truth of free grace is this: A guilty sinner with far from adequate knowledge about the Person and work of our Lord can come to Him and believe that Jesus will give him eternal life. And the moment he does believe, he will have that life.

This is true, in fact, even a few moments later he encounters some theological legalists who inform him he doesn't know enough to be saved! Such legalists refuse to justify such an "ignorant" believer. But God has already justified him.

As Paul puts it so clearly in Rom 3:26, God is "just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus." GIF

<sup>1</sup>J. B. Huxton, *Getting the Gospel Wrong: The Evangelical Crisis No One is Talking About*. Foreword [sic] by Earl D. Radmacher, [n.p.] (Xulon Press, 2008), pp. 405.



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## CORRECTION mistake

Greg Sapaugh wrote the Philemon Commentary

In the July-August *Grace in Focus* we mistakenly listed the author of Philemon and of a short excerpt we published as Brad Doskocil. Actually Brad did the commentary on Jude. Greg Sapaugh did the commentary on Philemon and on Philippians as well. Mea culpa.



# Legalism's Doctrinal Hydra

## Works *Legalism*

1. Ecclesiastical (e.g., Roman Church)
2. Commitment (e.g., Lordship)
3. Cultic (e.g., Mormonism)

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Issue: How Much Need to Do?

## Knowledge *Legalism*

4. Theological (e.g., Free Grace Debate)

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Issue: How Much Need to Know?

# 1

## Ecclesiastical Legalism

### Biblical Truth

#### Theology

Christ = Eternal Life

#### Formula

Faith = Justification

#### Conclusion

Justification is by faith alone,  
really alone!

### Roman Church

#### Theology

Christ + Works = Eternal Life

#### Formula

Faith + Works = Justification

#### Conclusion

Justification is by faith, but  
not by faith alone!

# 2

## Commitment Legalism

### Biblical Truth

#### Theology

Christ = Eternal Life

#### Formula

Faith = Justification

#### Conclusion

Justification is by faith alone,  
really alone!

### Reformed Theology

#### Theology

Christ\* = Eternal Life

#### Formula

Justification = Faith\* + Works

#### Conclusion

Justification is by faith alone,  
but not by faith that is alone!

\*Lordship's surrender & commitment

# 3

## Cultic Legalism

### Biblical Truth

#### Theology

Christ = Eternal Life

#### Formula

Faith = Justification

#### Conclusion

Justification is by faith alone,  
really alone!

### Mormonism

#### Theology

Christ + Works = Eternal Life

#### Formula

Faith + Works = Salvation

#### Conclusion

Salvation...is not by free grace  
alone. It requires work.

# 4

# Theological Legalism

## GES

### Theology

Person = Eternal Life  
(of Christ  
& Promise)

### Formula

Faith = Justification

### Conclusion

Justification is by faith alone,  
really alone!

## FGA

### Theology

Person + Works = Eternal Life  
(of Christ      (of Christ)  
& Promise)

### Formula

Faith = Justification

### Conclusion

Justification is by faith alone,  
really alone!



Requiring more than is  
actually required  
is, in fact,  
a form of Legalism!

If there is more than one view  
and  
If only one view is valid,  
then  
Someone is **WRONG!**



# Legalism Illustrated

## **Doing *Legalism***

## **Saving Message?**

1. Ecclesiastical

Catholic Pope

2. Commitment

MacArthur

3. Cultic

Mormon President

## **Knowing *Legalism***

## **Saving Message?**

4. Theological

Hodges or Hixson

Simple Faith Alone  
in Christ Alone,  
seemingly isn't that  
Simple anymore!

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Shouldn't it be simple enough  
for a child to understand?

(Matt. 18:3-5; Lk. 18:15-17)



## Issues To Consider

- What is the Good News/Gospel?
- Is there a required “Content of Faith”?
- What is the Object of Saving Faith?
- Is “Evidence for Faith” the same as “Content of Faith”?
- Is the Gospel of John outdated?
- What is Saving Faith?



# Good News/Gospel List

1. Christ died for our sins (1 Cor. 15:3b)
2. Christ was buried (1 Cor. 15:4a)
3. Christ was raised (1 Cor. 15:4b)
4. Christ appeared to Cephas (1 Cor. 15:5a)
5. Christ appeared to the twelve (1 Cor. 15:5b)
6. Christ appeared to >500 brethren (1 Cor. 15:6)
7. Christ appeared to James (1 Cor. 15:7a)
8. Christ appeared to all the apostles (1 Cor. 15:7b)
9. Christ appeared to Paul (1 Cor. 15:8)
10. Christ was born (Lk. 2:11b)
11. Christ was born in Bethlehem (Lk. 2:11a)
12. God's work of Justification (Rom. 1:16; ch. 3–5)
13. God's work of Sanctification (Rom. 1:17; ch. 6–8)



# Content of Faith

## Illustration #1

1. Christ's deity
2. Christ's death & resurrection
3. Gift by faith alone
4. Christ's incarnation

Greg Schliesmann

## Illustration #2

1. Christ's deity
2. Christ's humanity
3. Christ's death for our sins
4. Christ's resurrection
5. Salvation by grace through faith alone

Tom Stegall

## Illustration #3

1. Jesus Christ
2. Christ is Son of God who died and rose again
3. Christ paid one's personal penalty for sin
4. Christ gives eternal life to all who trust Him
5. Trust Christ alone for saving faith

J.B. Nixson

# Supposed Core Essentials List

1. Christ died for our sins (1 Cor. 15:3b)
2. Christ was buried (1 Cor. 15:4a)
3. Christ was raised (1 Cor. 15:4b)
4. Christ appeared to Cephas (1 Cor. 15:5a)
5. Christ appeared to the twelve (1 Cor. 15:5b)
6. Christ appeared to >500 brethren (1 Cor. 15:6)
7. Christ appeared to James (1 Cor. 15:7a)
8. Christ appeared to all the apostles (1 Cor. 15:7b)
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# Basis of Saving Faith

## FGA

## GES

Object of Faith	Christ
Propositional Truths	1. Death
	2. Burial
	3. Resur.
	4.
	5.
	6.
Supporting Evidence (authenticates the Object)	7.
	8.
	9.
	10.
	11.
	12.
	13.

Object of Faith	Christ
	1.
	2.
	3.
	4.
Supporting Evidence: (authenticates the Object)	5.
	6.
	7.
	8.
	9.
	10.
	11.
	12.
	13.



# Essential Basis for Saving Faith

## FGA

Object of Faith	Christ
Propositional Truths	1. Death
	2. Burial
	3. Resur.
	4.
	5.
	6.
Supporting Evidence (authenticates the Object)	7.
	8.
	9.
	10.
	11.
	12.
	13.

## GES

Object of Faith	Christ
	1.
	2.
	3.
	4.
Supporting Evidence: (authenticates the Object)	5.
	6.
	7.
	8.
	9.
	10.
	11.
	12.
	13.



Saving Faith  
has *No Content*,  
*Only an Object!*

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However,  
Supporting Evidence  
Authenticates that Object!



## Is the Gospel of John Outdated?

Using the progressive revelation argument, “Legalistic Gospel” advocates conclude the cross and post-cross evidence *must always* be included in the saving message.

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### Implication

Saving messages in the Gospel of John are outdated and need updating.



## John's Perspective

In John 7:39, the apostle clarified Christ's "rivers-of-living-water" teaching to refer to the future ministry of the Spirit.

*Yet*, when penning his Gospel many years after Christ's death and resurrection, John doesn't indicate anywhere that the saving message had changed since Christ's time on earth.

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### Implication

John's Gospel is not outdated  
or in need of updating.



# Required Saving Message

**FGA**

Expanded Saving  
Message

Christ + His Works

**GES**

Minimal Saving  
Message

Christ Alone

# Saving Faith

Persuasion, Confidence in, Reliance  
upon the truthfulness  
concerning the Person of Christ

Realization that what is said or promised  
concerning the Person of Christ is true

To Embrace the truth  
concerning the Person of Christ



## Evidence for Saving Faith

Does it matter *How Much* evidence is needed to persuade a person?

Does it matter *Which* evidence helps persuade a person?





# What is the Critical Issue?

The *Person* of Christ,  
Who can provide Eternal Life?

or

The detailed *Means*  
to provide Eternal Life?



# What is the Bottom Line?

Believe in *Christ*?

or

Believe in *Christ* and  
His *Resume*?

David Bast  
Young Life  
Jacksonville, FL



Believing in the  
Supporting *Evidence*  
does not save!

rather

Believing in the  
*Person* of Christ  
saves!



## Requirement for Saving Faith

If you require only Christ,  
you are a *Minimalist*

If you require Christ  
and His works,  
you are a *Legalist*



Requiring more than is  
actually required  
is, in fact,  
a form of Legalism!



# Heaven's Entry Quiz

**Why do you deserve to be in heaven?**

(mark all necessary to answer correctly)

- Believe in Christ for eternal life
- Believe Christ died for our sins
- Believe Christ was buried
- Believe Christ was raised
- Believe risen Christ appeared to many
- Believe Christ was born
- Believe Christ was born in Bethlehem
- Believe in Justification
- Believe in Sanctification
- Believe in Christ's virgin birth
- Believe in Christ's deity
- Believe in the Trinity

