

Review of Hixson, *Getting the Gospel Wrong: The Evangelical Crisis No One is Talking About*

Roscoe Barnes III

Hixson JB 2008. *Getting the Gospel Wrong: the Evangelical Crisis No One Is Talking About*. Xulon Press.

Introduction

At the time of the publication of this book, Hixson served as the executive director of Free Grace Alliance. He teaches theology at Grace School of Theology in The Woodlands, Texas, and Free Grace Seminary in Atlanta, Georgia. Hixson holds a Ph.D. from Baptist Bible Seminary, a Th.M. from Dallas Theological Seminary, and a B.A. from Houston Baptist University.

Hixson believes there is a crisis today in the presentation of the gospel, and that many churches, including their leaders, are confused about saving faith and the content of the gospel message.

In his book, *Getting the Gospel Wrong*, Hixson attempts to identify the problems and confusion surrounding the gospel and its presentation. In addition to analyzing some of the most popular beliefs and methods in evangelism, he defines the meaning of saving faith and presents what he considers to be the five essential components of the gospel message. He writes, 'Saving faith is the belief in Jesus Christ as the Son of God who died and rose again to pay one's personal penalty for sin, and the one who gives eternal life to all who trust Him and Him alone for it' (84).

1. Summary of the Book

Hixson presents his argument in ten chapters. In chapters one and two, he offers an overview of his topic, and a survey of what he calls the present postmodern American landscape. This, he writes, ‘will help to contextualize the setting in which the gospel is being proclaimed’ (30). In chapter two, which he titles, ‘Surveying the Landscape’, he suggests that confusion about the message of the gospel is ‘a crisis of eternal proportions’ and that the important question for humanity is, ‘What precisely must someone believe about Jesus in order to obtain eternal life?’ (38–39).

In his survey of current views of the gospel, Hixson argues that problematic and confusing views of the gospel are related to postmodern thinking which ‘provides a fertile ground for erroneous gospel presentations’ (63). He elaborates, explaining that ‘the abandonment of certainty, as well as the corresponding embracement of uncertainty, has fostered ambivalence toward accuracy and purity in evangelical soteriological methodology’ (63).

Hixson is a leader in the Free Grace Movement. In his notes for chapter three, he provides a stinging critique of the Grace Evangelical Society (GES), noting that it promotes a ‘refined view’ of what people must believe in order to be saved (152). According to Hixson, the view of GES is that a belief in Jesus as the guarantor of eternal life is all that is needed for a person to receive salvation. The death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus are part of the gospel message, but a person does not have to believe these factors in order to be saved. In Hixson’s view, GES has ‘gone too far’ (153).

In chapters four through eight, Hixson presents what he considers the five erroneous versions of the gospel. He begins with the ‘purpose

gospel' category, focusing on one's personal fulfillment and meaning in this present life. He writes that this version places no emphasis on sin and its eternal consequences. Next, he features the 'puzzling gospel', which he suggests is vague, imprecise or inconsistent. This version is followed by the 'prosperity gospel', a version that stresses the promise of earthly blessings that include healing, health, and material wealth. The fourth version is the 'pluralistic gospel', which allows for different religions and different routes to heaven. In his discussion of the fifth version, the 'performance gospel', Hixson writes that this gospel type seems to place an emphasis on a person's good works, suggesting that good works are a prerequisite or post-requisite to saving faith.

In discussing the five erroneous versions of the gospel, Hixson uses prominent people and ministries as case studies. He elaborates, 'The case studies should not be read as a detailed soteriological defense as much as an illustrational reportage of the current state of soteriological affairs in American evangelicalism' (31).

His primary reason for this approach, he explains, is to 'validate the premise that erroneous soteriological methods are well entrenched in postmodern American evangelicalism, and to interact with each case study sufficiently to show that it fails to meet the standard of the biblical gospel' (31).

Under the category of the purpose gospel, Hixson places Rick Warren, a well-known pastor and author (*The Purpose-Driven Church*), together with Kerry Shook, founder of Fellowship of The Woodlands, and Gotlife.org.

In the chapter on the puzzling gospel, Hixson discusses Billy Graham and his two gospel tracts, *Steps to Peace with God* and *How to Become a Christian*. According to Hixson, the first tract, which urges readers to

‘trust in Christ as Lord and Savior’, and then to ‘receive him by personal invitation’, offers instructions that are puzzling and self-contradictory (227). Hixson interprets Graham as contending that salvation is a two-step process, instead of a single step of faith.

In his discussion of the prosperity gospel, Hixson delves into the gospel presentations of TD Jakes, pastor of the Potter’s House in Dallas, and Kirbyjon Caldwell, pastor of Windsor Village United Methodist Church, in Houston. He also mentions Benny Hinn, and a number of leaders in the Word of Faith movement (e.g. Kenneth Hagin, Kenneth Copeland, Paul Crouch, Frederick Price, and Charles Capps).

In the chapter on the pluralistic gospel, Hixson references media interviews in which Billy Graham and Joel Osteen appeared to take an inclusivist position on the issue of salvation. When asked if people of other religions would go to heaven, both said that God would decide who enters heaven. Neither Graham nor Osteen stated that Christ is the only way to the Father (279). Hixson also provides a case study of John Sanders, former professor of religion and philosophy at Huntington University, suggesting that Sanders’ ‘defense of inclusivism has been influenced to some degree by personal experience’ (285).

Finally, in his discussion of the performance gospel, Hixson examines the beliefs of John MacArthur, a popular author and pastor of Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, California, and a leading proponent of Lordship Salvation. Hixson includes Bill Bright (author of the Gospel tract, *Have You Heard of the Four Spiritual Laws?*), James Kennedy (founder of Evangelism Explosion), David Wells (the Andrew Mutch Distinguished Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary), James Montgomery Boice (author of *The Glory of God's Grace*), RC Sproul (Reformed Theologian and founder of Ligonier Ministries), and John Piper (senior

pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church). With the aforementioned names in view, Hixson ends this chapter by writing that ‘some evangelical leaders seem bent on adopting a soteriological method that makes man’s entrance into heaven contingent to varying degrees upon his own good behavior’ (321).

In the notes for this section, Hixson criticizes the evangelistic method of Ray Comfort, author of *Hell’s Best Kept Secret* (2004) as follows: ‘His suggested remedy to man’s sin problem is far from the biblical standard of grace’ (324).

Hixson concludes his book with ‘suggested correctives’ that call for action on the part of evangelicals. He writes, ‘Evangelicals must strive to combat erroneous soteriological methods by implementing various intentional correctives’ (33).

2. Strengths of the Book

Hixson argues that ‘postmodernism has cultivated a resurgence of interest in spiritual matters’ (28). He writes that while his book addresses and critiques postmodern ideology, it is actually ‘a polemic against erroneous gospels that permeate American evangelical Christianity in the *present culture*’ (30).

Hixson makes a strong case for his argument as he daringly analyzes some of the most prominent evangelical leaders of today. He takes them to task as he urges believers to be diligent in presenting the gospel with clarity and sound biblical principles. He clearly shows how the simplicity of the gospel can be, and indeed has been, a source of confusion for many in the church. He also explains in striking detail, and with much persuasion, the consequences of this confusion. Hixson’s argument, which is made through the lens of dispensational

theology, is effective and detailed. His attention to a good exegesis of the scriptures is to be commended.

Hixson's work takes believers back to the beginning—to a fundamental teaching of the Bible. In an interesting, yet fervent manner, he urges them to take a fresh look at what they believe about the gospel. He also challenges them to rethink their position in light of sound biblical doctrine. Aside from being a solid argument for truth as it relates to salvation, Hixson's book is a reminder that truth can become lost in the sea of a changing society.

3. Weakness of the Book

Hixson's use of case studies is a useful approach. However, even though this approach is commendable, it risks the danger of painting with a broad brush. In fairness to those he analyzed, some may not actually fit into the categories in which he placed them. For instance, one might question how TD Jakes could be labeled a prosperity preacher because of the sources cited by Hixson. Although Kenneth Hagin is listed among the prosperity preachers, it would have been fair to note that Hagin criticized some of the practices of prosperity preachers in his book, *The Midas Touch: A Balanced Approach to Biblical Prosperity* (2002).

Conclusion

In spite of its weakness, *Getting the Gospel Wrong* is an important resource for church leaders and lay people alike, especially those in the evangelical tradition. While the author clearly identifies the current crisis involving confusion about the message of the gospels, he also takes great pain to provide advice and a practical solution.

Many churches, as the author indicates, appear to have fallen prey to different types of gospel messages. For this reason, there is an urgent need for clarity on saving faith and the essential content of the gospel.

Ultimately, this book is a thought-provoking treatise on the gospel message that deserves to be read by academic and popular audiences, or anyone who wants to accurately present the gospel. It is well researched, and presented with a sense of urgency.

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