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Lordship Salvation

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An Examination of John MacArthur's Book, **The Gospel According to Jesus**

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INTRODUCTION: John MacArthur's latest book, **The Gospel According to Jesus**, promises to be a "blockbuster" indeed and will no doubt further divide the evangelical community over the question of the exact terms of the sinner's salvation. This debate has been building for a number of years, but the publication of a work like this by a widely-read and respected Bible teacher will no doubt heighten the discussion considerably.

One always asks when reading a book of this nature, "Why did the author write it?" The answer can be found in one statement: "The superficial response is epidemic and is twentieth-century Christianity. . . Why? Because the gospel is usually presented with the promise of joy, warmth, fellowship, and a good feeling, but without the hard demand to take up one's cross and follow Christ" (p. 123). This is basically the main concern of MacArthur. The gospel has been made too easy. More stringent requirements are necessary than those normally presented in gospel preaching.

The essence of his argument is this:

"Eternal life is indeed a free gift. . . But that does not mean that there is no cost in terms of salvation's impact on the sinner's life. . . Obviously, a new believer does not fully understand all the ramifications of the lordship of Jesus at the moment of conversion. But a true believer has a desire to surrender. This is what distinguishes true faith from a bogus profession. True faith is humble, submissive obedience" (p. 140).

MacArthur is espousing what has become known as "lordship salvation." A sinner, in coming to Christ, must exercise faith, but included in that saving faith is a conscious submission to make Christ the Lord of his life (cf. p. 28, footnote).

Let us review some of his major points and make comments upon them.

1. An Attack upon Leading Dispensationalists.

MacArthur seems to believe that much of the fault in what he calls "easy believism" in gospel preaching can be laid at the feet of dispensational teachers such as Lewis Sperry Chafer, Charles Ryrie and others. He criticizes dispensationalists who teach that

law and grace are mutually exclusive (p. 25). Dispensationalists have been responsible for the "error" of distinguishing between salvation and discipleship. One is somewhat aghast at the force of MacArthur's attack upon dispensationalists while at the same time claiming that he is a "traditional premillennial dispensationalist" (p. 25).

The reason that MacArthur takes this position toward dispensationalists is evident as one proceeds through the volume. Major sections of Scripture upon which he depends for support in his defense of "lordship salvation" would not be viewed by normal dispensationalists as applicable to the gospel and its presentation.

It seems evident that MacArthur's thought has been greatly influenced by Reformed thinkers, and the enthusiasm with which some of them have received this volume would tend to support this observation. We think he especially has been influenced by Martyn Lloyd-Jones, the famous English expositor, who has set forth many of the same thoughts now propounded by MacArthur.

Particular criticism is leveled at the strong distinctions made between the "age of law" and the "age of grace." "Actually, elements of both law and grace are part of the program of God in every dispensation" (p. 26). But here, we believe, MacArthur misses the point. Most dispensationalists never have said that there was **no grace** evident in the age (dispensation) of law. What they have taught is that **the governing principle of life** between the age of law and the age of grace is different. Nor does their teaching suggest that because the Christian is under grace he, therefore, has no controlling principles to his life and is free to do whatever he wishes. Dispensationalists have not been "antinomians" (as one of the Reformed scholars suggests whose endorsement appears upon the cover of this volume). The fact of the matter is that the law has been "done away" (II Cor. 3:11) and "abolished" (II Cor. 3:13). This point did not originate with Darby or Scofield. It was made by the apostle Paul.

2. Saving faith is more than mental assent.

A number of times, in various ways, this emphasis is given. Saving faith is "more than just understanding the facts and mentally acquiescing" (p. 31). We do not know any fundamental preachers of the gospel who would disagree with that statement. We never have heard any reputable gospel preacher ever teach otherwise. The old Scofield Bible declared that "faith is personal trust, apart from meritorious works, in the Lord Jesus Christ" (p. 1302, Scofield Bible). The **Ryrie Study Bible** declares, "Both Paul and James define faith as a living, productive trust in Christ" (note on James 2:14).

In this connection MacArthur laments, "Contemporary Christendom too often accepts a shallow repentance that bears no fruit" (p. 96). This theme recurs over and over again in the book. The recommended cure for this malady is to require more of the seeking sinner than the Bible requires. Instead of "merely" believing on the finished work of Christ the inquiring soul must also be willing to have Christ as Lord over every area of his life. It seems evident upon an examination of this thesis that those who espouse it are adding something to the gospel that is not in the Scriptures. Charles Ryrie was certainly on target when he wrote, "The message of faith only and the message of faith plus commitment of life cannot both be the gospel. . ." (**Balancing the Christian Life**, p. 170).

It is at this point that MacArthur's view of repentance should be mentioned. He places great emphasis upon repentance and indicts modern gospel preachers with possessing an incorrect view of it. While accepting repentance as a part of saving faith, he says, "It is a redirection of the human will, a purposeful decision to forsake all unrighteousness and pursue righteousness instead" (p. 163). "No evangelism that omits the message of repentance can properly be called the gospel. . ." (p. 167).

The word "repent" in the New Testament means "to have another mind, to change the mind." True repentance is to have a change of mind regarding sin, God and the Lord Jesus Christ. Repentance is not an act separate from saving faith but a part of it. When I believe on the Savior I am repenting of my sins. One cannot "believe" in the New Testament sense of that word without also "repenting." To "believe" does not mean "to be willing to give up all that is displeasing to God." It means to accept with all the heart what the Bible says about my sin and about Christ's sacrifice for me.

3. The distinction commonly made between the carnal Christian and the spiritual Christian is invalid.

This is a familiar theme, particularly among Reformed theologians such as Lloyd-Jones, mentioned earlier. Their impression seems to be that if one admits to the existence of "carnal Christians" one is merely seeking to find a way to excuse the loose living of professing believers. MacArthur sees this distinction as intertwined with the teaching that there may be a difference between a person who is saved and a person who has decided to become a disciple. To him every believer is a "disciple."

In the first place, those who speak of "carnal" Christians are only employing the terminology of Scripture. Paul speaks of those believers who are "carnal" (fleshly, I Cor. 3:1) and speaks of the evidence of such a condition in the verses that follow. While brethren may deny the existence of such an individual we would venture to say that a considerable number of examples could be found in their own churches! One is not going to make "carnal" Christians vanish simply by demanding that saving faith include surrender to the Lordship of Christ. Even if that were done it would not guarantee that the new convert would submit to the Lordship of Christ when confronted with a specific demand. If he did not do so, he would become a "carnal" Christian, walking according to the flesh and not the Spirit.

In his zeal to defend his view we believe our brother has made some extreme statements which do not describe properly the vast majority of fundamental gospel preachers of our acquaintance. "Anyone who says he has 'accepted Christ' is enthusiastically received as a Christian, even if his supposed faith later gives way to a persistent pattern of disobedience, gross sin, or hostile unbelief" (p. 97). In his footnote explanation of I Corinthians 3:3 MacArthur does admit that the Corinthian believers were "behaving in a carnal way" (p. 97). Perhaps we have missed some subtle distinction, but we fail to see the difference between "behaving in a carnal way" and being a "carnal Christian."

4. Evangelistic appeals are suspect.

"It may surprise you to learn that Scripture never once exhorts sinners to 'accept Christ.'" (p. 106). We are guilty, says the writer, of employing incorrect terminology when we plead with sinners to "accept Jesus Christ as your personal Savior" (p. 106). In citing John 1:11-12 the point is made that "receiving Christ" is more than "accepting him" (p. 106, footnote). The explanation of the difference, however, is less than satisfactory. In an apparent reference to the problem of the *ordo salutis* (the order of salvation) MacArthur declares, "Thus conversion is not simply a sinner's decision for Christ; it is first the sovereign work of God in transforming the individual" (p. 107). We gather that perhaps he is teaching that regeneration precedes faith. Nevertheless, whatever his view may be on that, it cannot be denied that the sinner must make a decision. We must "believe on the Lord Jesus Christ." He must "repent and believe the gospel." The Bible emphasizes the call to the sinner. Christ condemned the sinners of His day by

saying, "Ye will not come to me, that ye might have life" (Jn. 5:40). While it is God that saves, there is still a responsibility to come, and we, as faithful witnesses, must issue that invitation.

5. The saving gospel was a principal part of Christ's message while on earth.

"It is a mistake of the worst sort to set the teachings of Paul and the apostles over against the words of our Lord and imagine that they contradict one another or speak to different dispensations. . . While Jesus' gospel was not yet fully completed until his death and resurrection, the elements of it were all clear in His preaching" (p. 214). This is a very strange statement indeed for one who claims to be a dispensationalist. As MacArthur himself has admitted in this very section there was no gospel to proclaim until it was produced through the vicarious death of the Savior and His resurrection from the tomb. How would the Jews in the land of Palestine who heard Christ's preaching be capable of believing "good news" which, at that period in time, was non-existent except in prophetic utterances? Gospel preachers were to go to the ends of the earth with the saving message following Christ's death, resurrection, and His provision of the Holy Spirit to empower the witnesses (Luke 24:45-49). We believe it is our brother who wrote the above who has made the "mistake" and not those who have been, and do, make a distinction between the dispensation of law, under which Christ conducted His earthly ministry, and the dispensation of grace, under which we labor today.

MacArthur finds the saving gospel of Christ in very strange places. For instance, Christ exhorted men thusly, "Whosoever will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross, and follow me" (Mark 8:34). MacArthur states, "The explicit subject is eternal life and salvation" (p. 135). Here is a failure to see the distinction between **salvation** and **discipleship**. Salvation is free; discipleship is costly. Salvation comes by **receiving** the work of the cross; discipleship is evidenced by **bearing** the cross (daily submission to the will of God). Christ here is not giving instructions about how to go to heaven, but how those who know they are going to heaven should follow Him.

Of the parable of the landowner who hires men at various hours of the day and then pays them the same wages (Matt. 20:1-16) MacArthur declares, "The issue here is the equality of eternal life" (p. 146). One looks in vain, however, in this parable for any delineation of the gospel nor any reference to the bestowment of eternal life. The parable deals with the sovereign distribution of **rewards** for service, not the apportionment of salvation. MacArthur sees no distinction between Christ's presentation of the kingdom and the message of the gospel. "When Jesus proclaimed His kingdom, He was preaching salvation" (p. 89). He says further that "the essence of Jesus' message was **always** the gospel of salvation" (p. 90).

While there are shades of difference among dispensationalists as to the interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount, none, to this writer's knowledge, supports the concepts that MacArthur advances. He says the sermon on the Mount contains "pure gospel" (p. 179) and, with His appeal in Matthew 7:13-14 about entering in at the narrow gate Christ "brings the Sermon on the Mount to its evangelistic climax" (p. 179). How this could be is puzzling indeed. Where is the "evangel" in the Sermon on the Mount? There is no gospel there at all. It was not intended to be a gospel presentation, but was addressed to His own disciples who already were believers.

In his discussion of the wide and narrow gates the writer sees the teaching as combating "the modern notion that salvation is easy" (p. 182). This same thought is repeated in various places in the book. Christ's words in Matthew 7, it is said, contradict the popular teaching "that becoming a Christian is only a matter of believing some

facts, signing on a dotted line, walking an aisle, raising a hand, or praying the right prayer" (p. 182). While some careless and superficial zealots perhaps could be accused of such notions it is but a caricature of the multitudes of serious-minded and concerned evangelists and evangelistic pastors who call upon sinners to obey the New Testament command, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved" (Acts 16:31). By such an exhortation they do not mean to merely "believe some facts." They mean that the godless sinner should receive, believe upon, a wonderful Person who has provided salvation by grace for him. They mean that there should be a definite act of faith which rests solely upon the work of the Savior.

What is the Biblical definition of the gospel? "Christ died for our sins. . . was buried, and. . . rose again" (I Cor. 15:3-4). This message is not the same as the Sermon on the Mount or a call for crossbearing. The message of the gospel is a message of free grace flowing from the cross of Calvary and appropriated by the simple faith of the sinner.

Is it an "easy" gospel? It depends upon what you mean by that statement. It was certainly not "easy" in its procurement. The price - the suffering and death of the infinite Son of God was great. If one means by the word "easy" that it is "simple," that is, uncomplicated and free to the sinner, our answer would be, "Yes, it is easy." If one means by use of the word "easy" that proponents of salvation by faith alone condone a life of sinful abandon after one's salvation, our answer would be that of the apostle Paul, "God forbid!" While MacArthur excoriates dispensationalists whom he claims have a loose view of the demands of salvation, we do not believe that is a fair and balanced view of what leading dispensationalists have taught. In the footnote commenting on I John 3:4, 6, 9 the **New Scofield Bible** says, "Here and in similar places in this Epistle the Greek verb has the force of a continuous present tense. . . and thus denotes a person's habitual attitude toward sin as expressed in his practice or non-practice of it. . . he is stressing the fact that a Christian cannot keep on practicing sin, because he is born of God" (Footnote on I Jn. 3:4, p. 1307). While the view of Zane Hodges (**The Gospel Under Siege**) and perhaps some other dispensationalists may differ from the view just quoted, the Scofield footnote, represents a solid and widely-held view among dispensationalists. J. Ronald Blue, the commentator on the Book of James in **The Bible Knowledge Commentary**, a commentary with a dispensational approach, in discussing the relationship between faith and works says simply, "Spiritual works are the evidence, not the energizer, of sincere faith" (**The Bible Knowledge Commentary**, II. 826). Those who are preaching the gospel of saving grace do not for one moment condone a life of sinful abandon on the part of a believer.

6. Opponents of the concept of "lordship salvation" are antinomian.

While mentioned earlier, we return for further comments. The term "antinomian" may mean different things to different people. Historically it has often been used to describe persons who repudiate any necessity for adherence to moral standards on the part of a child of God. MacArthur declares, "The teaching that Christians are freed from observing any moral law is rampant in today's evangelical community" (p. 190). We believe our brother again has overstepped himself in his zeal to correct what he feels are excesses or weaknesses in Bible-believing churches. He has made a very exaggerated statement. Certainly most strong fundamental gospel preachers believe that there are high moral standards incumbent upon the believer. Perhaps behind this statement lies the notion, forwarded strongly by those of Reformed persuasion, that because dispensationalists teach that a believer is not under the authority and requirements of the Mosaic law, they therefore are advocating in effect a complete freedom from all moral requirements. Such is definitely not the case. Because believers are free from the burden of observing the Mosaic law, this does not give them the freedom to observe **no** rules.

God's grace teaches us that we are to deny "ungodliness and worldly lusts" and are to live "soberly, righteously and godly in this present world" (Titus 2:12). We do not have to enslave New Testament believers again to the Mosaic law in order to have righteousness produced in them. Righteousness is produced in the believer by grace, not by law (Rom. 8:3-6).

7. Personal salvation requires a "willingness to surrender to (Christ) as Lord" (p. 207).

In demonstration of this thesis, MacArthur cites four basic passages: Acts 2:21; 2:36; 16:31, and Romans 10:9-10. He feels that all of these passages "include indisputably the lordship of Christ as part of the gospel to be believed for salvation" (p. 207).

The title "Lord" is used in all of these passages for Christ. The question is, What does the term mean in these contexts, and how does such meaning apply to the terms of salvation? In practical terms, if a man who has smoked all of his adult life inquires about how he may be saved, should he be told that he must give up his smoking as a demonstration of his yieldedness to Christ as Lord and as a condition to his salvation? Does the appeal, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 16:31) mean "Surrender all parts of your life to Christ" or does it mean, "Rest in the finished work of Christ which was accomplished for you?" We believe it means the latter. The term "Lord" as used of Jesus in these passages is not emphasizing **His right to enthronement** but **His identity as deity**. Charles Ryrie, I believe, is correct when he states that in the term "Lord", as used in these salvation passages, "deity is the principle emphasis and the focal point of faith as far as salvation from sin is concerned" (**Balancing the Christian Life**, p. 176). The term "Lord", as used in gospel appeals in the New Testament, speaks of an inherent position and quality which Christ possesses and not of an act of surrender on the part of the believing sinner.

One of the chief objections to the notion of "lordship salvation" is that it adds to the gospel of grace. It requires something of the sinner which the Scriptures do not require. The message of salvation by grace proclaims to sinner that they may receive eternal life by **faith alone** whereas the message of "lordship salvation" tells sinners they must be willing to give up whatever is in their life that is displeasing to God. At the point of gospel presentation they do not know what things those are, nor does the personal worker seeking to point them to Jesus know. There is a vast and significant difference between **believing** on Christ for salvation and **learning** from Him as our Lord. As we have already pointed out, MacArthur does not separate discipleship from salvation (p. 196). But the calls to discipleship were addressed specifically to His followers **who were already believers**. MacArthur seeks to refute this by claiming that these various passages about cross-bearing, etc. **only describe what the disciples did when they believed**. But it should be noted that these exhortations are in the active voice, "Take up your cross," and not "You have taken up your cross." Christ is exhorting those who have already **trusted Him** for salvation to **follow Him** as Lord of their lives.

Conclusion: John MacArthur is a sincere servant of the Lord, of that we have no doubt. He is a good man, but good men can be wrong. We believe in his advocacy of the so-called "lordship salvation" he is wrong. He desperately desires to see holiness, lasting fruit, and continuing faithfulness in the lives of Christian people. This reviewer

and we believe all sincere church leaders desire the same. None of us are happy with shoddy, fleshly, and disobedient Christians. But the remedy for this condition is not found in changing the terms of the gospel. Well over 100 times in the New Testament, we are told that salvation is by faith or through believing. It is a very serious matter to add an ingredient to the gospel of salvation which is not found in the New Testament. While one may argue that "faith", if properly understood, includes the ingredient of "submission" or "enthronement", we believe the Scriptures do not support this contention. Our task is to keep preaching the plain, simple gospel of free grace. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to produce in true believers those qualities of righteousness which we all devoutly long to see.

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