JOHN MacARTHUR, JR'S SYSTEM OF SALVATION

An Evaluation of the Book, *The Gospel According to Jesus*

G. Michael Cocoris

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE: A PERSONAL WORD 1

INTRODUCTION: MACARTHUR'S SYSTEM OF SALVATION 3

THE CONVERSATIONS OF JESUS 5

NICODEMUS 5
THE WOMAN AT THE WELL 6
MATTHEW 7
THE BLIND MAN 8
THE RICH YOUNG RULER 9
ZACCHAEUS 11
JUDAS 11
THE CROWD 12

THE PARABLES JESUS TOLD 13

THE SOILS 13
THE WHEAT AND THE TARES 13
THE TREASURE AND THE PEARL 14
THE PARABLE OF THE FIRST AND THE LAST 15
THE LOST AND THE FOUND 15

THE DOCTRINE JESUS TAUGHT 17

REPENTANCE 17
TRUE FAITH 18
THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT (MATTHEW 7:13-14) 20
THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT (MATTHEW 7:21-23) 21
DISCIPLESHIP 22
LORDSHIP 23

APPENDIX 1 25

APPENDIX 2 27

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS 28

MACARTHUR MISREPRESENTS DISPENSATIONALISTS 28
MACARTHUR HAS MISINTERPRETED THE NEW TESTAMENT 29
MACARTHUR MISHANDLES THEOLOGY 32
MACARTHUR MISCONSTRUES CHURCH HISTORY 32
MACARTHUR WILL MISLEAD MANY 32

PREFACE: A PERSONAL WORD

When I was eighteen years old a pastor in my hometown led me to Jesus Christ. On that Tuesday night in April of 1958, my life was radically transformed. I immediately began to tell everyone I knew that Jesus Christ saves sinners. From that day until this I have been concerned that people come to know Christ.

Within two years of my conversion I also became concerned about something else. I discovered that some over-zealous Christians were shooting Bible verses at prospective converts, like bullets out of a machine gun, getting the converts to pray (usually with "a gun pointed at their head") and calling it conversion. There was no conviction of sin and no understanding of the gospel. There was a decision, but no saving faith. That approach to evangelism, now called "easy believism," I have deplored virtually all of my Christian life. When I wrote a book on the subject of evangelism, I included a chapter entitled "Don't Ask Jesus into Your Heart" aimed at easy believism, which I prefer to call decisionism.

For five years, I had the privilege of teaching evangelism at Dallas Theological Seminary. I attempted to simply expound what the Scriptures had to say concerning the gospel and evangelism. I also hammered away at decisionism. During those days, a student asked me why I never mentioned lordship salvation. The thought had never occurred to me! For one thing, lordship salvation was not as popular in evangelical circles then as it is today. Besides, there was so much else I wanted to cover in my basic course on evangelism at the seminary that I had little room for a lecture on lordship salvation. Nevertheless, to pacify a small group of students, I developed a lecture on lordship salvation, which I delivered outside of class. That lecture eventually became a small booklet entitled *Lordship Salvation: Is It Biblical?*

More recently, decisionism seems to be on the decline and lordship salvation seems to be increasing in popularity. Perhaps this is due, in part, to recent scandals in evangelicalism. With men in high places falling to new depths, lordship salvation has magnetic appeal to many. At any rate, two books by well-known pastors have appeared defending lordship salvation*: Christ's Call to Discipleship* by James Montgomery Boice and *The Gospel According to Jesus* by John MacArthur, Jr.

Because my booklet on lordship salvation is mentioned in the footnotes of MacArthur's book, I've been asked repeatedly what I thought of his book in general and his position on lordship salvation in particular. It was only after spending so much time discussing these issues that I decided to save time by putting my opinions on paper. Keep in mind that an accurate presentation of the gospel has been a life-long concern of mine. (Admittedly, this is brief. Perhaps some day, Lord willing, I will write a book on the subject of salvation which will give a much more definitive explanation of my understanding of what the New Testament teaches concerning salvation. If I do, I will answer lordship salvation in more depth. Since this was written in 1989, I have written the book on lordship salvation. It is entitled *The Salvation Controversy*.)

First, a personal word about John MacArthur, Jr. is in order. In my opinion, Dr. John MacArthur, Jr. is a gifted communicator and teacher. He is a fellow pastor and a personal

acquaintance. He spoke at my installation as Pastor of the Church of the Open Door. Once when we as a church were facing an ominous decision, I sought his counsel and he graciously gave me the better part of an afternoon to hear me out and give me advice. Though the subject of lordship salvation was mentioned briefly at that meeting, we have not actually discussed it with each other. (A meeting for several of us to discuss this issue with John was once scheduled, but unfortunately it was cancelled.) As far as I am concerned, and as far as I know of John, there is no animosity between us. I believe he has sincerely served the Lord and that God has greatly used him.

My differences with Dr. MacArthur are doctrinal. We simply differ on the subject of salvation. Explaining the differences can be difficult because so much is involved. The issues are textual, theological, and practical. To answer the questions I am now being asked concerning all of this, it is necessary to examine carefully *The Gospel According to Jesus*.

In my opinion, decisionism does not go far enough in its presentation of the gospel of the grace of God. Lordship salvation goes too far. The Biblical balance lies between the two extremes. I have not written the following either to defend myself or to attack MacArthur. I am not taking my position because of anything that has happened in my life, my family, or among any of my friends. As for my relationship with MacArthur, to disagree with a man is not to dishonor him. My motive is simply to defend the gospel of the grace of God and to make a plea for biblical balance so that believers will present a clear gospel to sinners who so desperately need to be saved.

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INTRODUCTION: MacARTHUR'S SYSTEM OF SALVATION

In *The Gospel According to Jesus,* John MacArthur, Jr. expresses his deep concern over the preaching of a gospel of cheap grace and easy believism. According to MacArthur, easy believism has produced spurious conversions and ruined the purity of the church. The solution is to return to the gospel Jesus preached.

There is more. MacArthur claims that easy believism teaches that all a person has to do to be saved is to believe certain facts, make a momentary decision, pray a prayer, sign a card, or walk an aisle. According to MacArthur, dispensationalism has produced today's gospel of easy believism, because of its almost "obsessive desire" to compartmentalize truth to the point of making unbiblical distinctions. Dispensationalists have made distinctions and dichotomies where they should not have.

For example, they make a distinction between salvation and discipleship and between two classes of Christians: carnal and spiritual. They have separated repentance from obedience and works from true faith. They have relegated the material of the Sermon on the Mount to the millennium. More specifically, MacArthur contends that Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer, founder of Dallas Theological Seminary, taught these things which then "became the basis for a whole new way of looking at the gospel" (p. 24). An evangelistic message "growing out of such a system differs sharply from the gospel according to Jesus" (p. 27).

MacArthur's point, then, is that dispensationalism has produced today's gospel of easy believism which teaches that all one has to do to be saved is just believe the facts about Christ and claim eternal life. "There need be no turning from sin, no resulting change in life style, no commitment—not even a *willingness* to yield to Christ's Lordship" (p. 22). It is even possible to reject Christ as Lord and yet receive Him as Savior (p. 27).

MacArthur proposes that the correction of the fallacies and failures of easy believism is to preach and teach the gospel according to Jesus. He insists that he believes that salvation is by grace through faith, but, he adds, that entails turning from sin and submission to the Lordship of Christ. There is a cost to be counted and a price to be paid, but that does not constitute salvation by works, the author assures us, since salvation is the work of a sovereign God who bestows "saving faith, repentance, commitment and obedience." Therefore, salvation must inevitably produce a change of heart and life. If there is no transformation of behavior, there is no work of God, only an empty profession of believing facts. Support for this position is gleaned from the conversations Jesus had with various individuals, the parables He told, and the doctrine He taught, especially in His Sermon on the Mount.

Whether or not he intended to do so in the process of explaining his view of the gospel according to Jesus, MacArthur presents a system of salvation. (By system I mean MacArthur has selected data pertaining to salvation from the ministry of Christ and organized it into a theology of salvation.) His system of salvation consists of four basic tenets: 1) God gives repentance, faith, commitment, and obedience, 2) there will be an immediate, perceivable, observable transformation of behavior, 3) true believers may

momentarily fall, but they will ultimately endure to the end, and 4) if a person falls away he was never genuinely saved. In short, salvation is the work of God and it will, therefore, result in a transformed life, which will endure.

The scenario presented in *The Gospel According to Jesus* raises a number of issues: easy believism and the lack of godly living among church members today, the interpretation of various passages in the gospels, the meaning of the requirements for and the results of salvation, God's part in salvation, plus questions concerning the teaching of the epistles and the positions of various church leaders throughout history. This book also creates several practical problems.

The format of this presentation will follow the structure of the book, *The Gospel According to Jesus.* First, I will examine MacArthur's interpretation of the conversations of Jesus, the parables of Jesus and the doctrine of Jesus. I will discuss his handling of the epistles and church history. Then, an evaluation will be offered. Throughout this paper, a statement within quotation marks followed by a page number in parenthesis is a quotation from MacArthur's book.

If you are interested in my critique of MacArthur's interpretations, you need to read the whole paper. If you're only interested in my overall evaluation of MacArthur's book, then you need only read the last chapter entitled "Concluding Observations."

THE CONVERSATIONS OF JESUS

According to the book, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, Jesus heralded His gospel to at least nine individuals. These individual conversations demonstrate, according to MacArthur, that Jesus did not preach a cheap grace or easy believism. Rather, Jesus demanded that individuals turn from sin and submit to His lordship. Is that right? Let's examine what MacArthur says about these conversations and then let's look at the conversations themselves in the New Testament to see if MacArthur's commentary is correct.

NICODEMUS

MacArthur points out that some view John 3 as a statement about how easy it is to believe on Jesus Christ. He accuses them of missing the point of the episode (p. 38). He claims that one of the reasons Jesus used the story of the serpent in the wilderness was to show Nicodemus "the necessity of repentance." "In fact," MacArthur writes, "Jesus used this particular illustration precisely because it challenged Nidodemus' arrogant Pharisaism" (p. 46). According to MacArthur, Jesus was telling Nicodemus he needed to "identify with sinning, rebellious Israelites," acknowledge his sin and repent (p. 46). He claims the Israelites had to "drag themselves to where they could see" the serpent (p. 46).

Granted, the sinful Israelites acknowledged their sin (Num. 21:7), but is that the reason Jesus referred to the story and is that the point He wished to establish? There is not a hint of such an application in Jesus' message to Nicodemus. In fact, the only parallel He drew from Numbers 21 was between the serpent and the Son of Man, not between Nicodemus and the Israelites. Nowhere in Numbers 21 does it say, or even remotely suggest, that "they had to drag themselves to where they could see it, the serpent" (p. 46). The serpent was *lifted up* so that they could see it! MacArthur's exposition of John 3:14 is eisegesis and not exegesis. He is putting messages into the text and not getting truth out of the text. He uses this to insist that Jesus was showing Nicodemus the necessity of repentance, but the word "repent" does not appear in John 3 at all. It does not occur in the whole Gospel of John--not once!

By the way, MacArthur states, "It is noteworthy that Moses records no further occurrence of the kind of rebellion that brought about their judgment. They turned to God in desperation and with genuine repentance. Jesus was demanding that Nicodemus do the same" (p. 46). The truth is: the people who looked at the serpent in Numbers 21 to be saved from death because they murmured committed idolatry and immorality in Numbers 25.

From the material in John 3, MacArthur contends that "real faith results in obedience" (p. 46). To establish that point, he quotes, but does not explain, John 3:20, 21, and claims that John 3:36 is saying disobedience is unbelief (p. 47). Then he concludes that "thus the test of true faith is this: does it produce obedience? If not, it is not saving faith. Disobedience is unbelief. Real faith obeys" (p. 47). (In the next chapter he also appeals to Hebrews 3:18 and 19 to argue that disobedience is equivalent to unbelief.)

John 3:20 simply says that people who practice evil hate the light and do not come to the light lest their deeds be exposed. Verse 21 says people who practice truth come to the light. How does either one of these verses prove that "real faith results in obedience?" The way MacArthur is handling these verses requires that one has to practice truth before coming to the light or those who believe always practice truth and, therefore, they come to the light. From the rest of the book it would probably be safe to assume he means that those who believe always practice truth and, therefore, they come to the light, but that is not what John 3:21 says. It does not *say* all who believe *always* practice truth. Again, MacArthur is reading something into the text that is simply not there.

John 3:36 says, "He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; but he who does not obey the Son shall not see life but the wrath of God abides on him." The apostle is employing a parallelism. He is contrasting believing with obeying. Therefore, to obey is to believe. (God commands men to believe in order to be saved. Cf. Acts 16:31.) Furthermore, notice that the verse says, "He who does not obey *shall not* (future tense) see life." The obedience is something that precedes life; it is simple obedience to the command to believe. John 3:36 says nothing about faith producing obedience. MacArthur has it backwards. This text is not saying disobedience is unbelief; it is teaching that unbelief is disobedience. Nor does Hebrews 3:18, 19, make obedience equivalent to faith. That passage is simply saying that the Israelites failed to obey God because they didn't believe Him.

If a person didn't have MacArthur's explanation to confuse him, he would never conclude from John 3 that the basis of eternal life is anything but believe, or obey the command to believe. Nothing is said about repentance or obedience subsequent to faith. The message of John 3 is simply "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life." If anyone in the world will simply trust in Jesus Christ and Him alone, he will have eternal life.

THE WOMAN AT THE WELL

MacArthur charges those who do not see Jesus demanding a commitment from the woman at the well of missing the point entirely (p. 54). He argues that drinking water is not simply appropriation, but "implies full compliance and surrender. Furthermore, to attempt to define faith with a metaphor is unwarranted selectivity" (pp. 52, 53). He then appeals to John 3:36 and Hebrews 3:18, 19, to demonstrate that disobedience is equated with unbelief. He concludes, "The living water He held out was the gift of salvation, including all that is inherent in the reality of redemption--freedom from sin, the commitment to follow Jesus, the ability to obey God's law, and the power and desire to live a life that glorifies Him" (p. 53).

Does MacArthur mean to say that the woman at the well understood Jesus was asking for commitment and obedience when He offered her a drink of living water? Assuming MacArthur's appeal to other verses proves his point, and they most certainly do not (compare my comments on John 3:36), did she understand Jesus was asking for surrender and commitment? How could she have ever gotten that out of the God-created metaphor for faith in drinking water?

MacArthur appeals to Matthew 20:22 and John 18:11 to argue that drinking "clearly implies full compliance and surrender" (p. 52), but the meaning of a figure of speech in one passage is not necessarily the meaning of that figure in another. Using that method all kinds of erroneous conclusions could be drawn, for example, in Revelation 5:5 Jesus is called a lion. In 1 Peter 5:8 Satan is called a lion. Using one passage to interpret the other one could conclude Christ is Satan! First and foremost, the interpretation of a passage is determined by the context. The context of John 4 does not contain anything to suggest that Jesus was demanding "full compliance and surrender" from the woman. In this passage Jesus is saying all she had to do was take a drink (cf. Jn. 4:10) which does not mean "full compliance and surrender."

MacArthur also claims that "when Jesus said the Father was seeking true worshipers it was more than a statement of fact. It was a personal invitation to the Samaritan Woman. The importance of that invitation should not be missed because it debunks the notion that Jesus was offering eternal life without making any demand for a spiritual commitment" (p. 56), but Jesus discusses worship because *she* brought it up (Jn. 4:20). Moreover, when Jesus finished His mini-discourse on worship, she didn't say, "Oh, I see, I'm not worshipping right." She said, "I know that Messiah is coming (who is called Christ). When He comes He will tell us all things" (Jn. 4:25). She got the point Jesus *was* making, namely, that He is the Messiah! That's what she told the whole town (Jn. 4:28 and 29).

The one thing this conversation clearly illustrates is that Jesus did *not* demand either a *turning* from sin or a *commitment* to future service in order to be saved. He *did* confront her with her sin of living with a man to whom she was not married (cf. Jn. 4:17-10), but He did *not* tell her she had to cease and desist before she could have eternal life. He did discuss true worship, but did not make it a condition of salvation. (Not everything discussed in an evangelistic conversation is a condition of salvation.) Christ simply communicated to the woman at the well that she was a sinner (Jn. 4:17-18) and He was the Savior (J.. 4:25-26) and she believed (Jn. 4:29); He did not practice lordship salvation.

MacArthur closes this chapter by saying "the final chapter of the Bible closes with this invitation which invokes a picture of the Samaritan woman: 'Let the one who is thirsty, come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost' (Rev. 22:17). While it is free it is not cheap; the Savior Himself paid the ultimate price so that thirsty, penitent seekers could drink as deeply as they like" (p. 58). Now, MacArthur is correct. Christ paid *so that we do not have to pay*! As John, the apostle, said, it is "without cost" (Rev. 22:17). Who would know better the true meaning of John 4 than John, the apostle?

MATTHEW

In Matthew 9, Jesus told Matthew, a tax collector, to "follow me" (Mt. 9:9). Jesus then ate in Matthew's home (Mt. 9:10). When the Pharisees complained that Jesus was eating with "tax collectors and sinners" Jesus replied that He did not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance (Mt. 9:10-13). MacArthur calls this "Matthew's conversion." He points out that Luke adds, "And he left everything behind" (Lk. 5:28). He then says, "He (that is Matthew) paid a great price, perhaps a higher price than any of

the other disciples" (pp. 61, 62). "He knew what he was signing up for. He had counted the cost and was prepared to obey" (p. 63).

Is Matthew 9 recording the conversion of Matthew or his call to discipleship? Did he leave everything in order to have his sins forgiven or to become a student and servant of Christ? Earlier in the Gospel of Matthew, the invitation to Peter and Andrew to "follow me" (Mt. 4:19) was not a call to conversion, but a call to discipleship. There is no way that the invitation of Matthew 4 could be their conversion, because they were already converted! In John 1, which chronologically happened before Matthew 4, they discovered who Jesus was (cf. Jn. 1:40-42). John specifically says they believed (Jn. 2:11). It was after their faith in Christ that He invited them to "follow me." Matthew 9 is not Matthew's call to salvation; it is his call to discipleship.

Besides Jesus' statement that He had come not to call the righteous but sinners to repentance was not a commentary on Matthew's conversion, but rather a comment on the Pharisees' criticism that he was eating "with tax collectors and sinners" (Mt. 9:11). Matthew 9 is *not* teaching that Matthew "paid a great price . . . counted the cost and was prepared to obey" in order to be forgiven of his sins. It is teaching that he did all of that to follow Christ. Remember, as MacArthur himself pointed out in chapter 3, the water of life is "without cost" (p. 58). If Jesus paid the cost then Matthew didn't have to. If Matthew paid the cost, why did Jesus have to pay? If Jesus paid the cost and Matthew had to pay costs too, then salvation was paid for twice. The truth is salvation was too costly for Matthew to be able to pay for it anyway!

THE BLIND MAN

MacArthur charges that "those who argue against lordship salvation have a tendency to view faith as merely intellectual assent to a set of biblical facts. To them, the gospel is ultimately an academic issue, a list of basic historical and doctrinal data about Christ's death, burial and resurrection. Believing those facts constitutes saving faith" (p. 67). He then argues that it is not a theology lesson, which brought about the transformation of the blind man in John 9, but a miracle of God's grace (p. 69). The blind man did not gain his sight because he was exposed to the light for, as John correctly observes, "no amount of light affects the blindness. A blind man in daylight is equally blind in the dark. All the light in the world will not make blind eyes see. The only thing that can cure physical blindness is surgery or a miracle" (p. 73).

MacArthur also gleans from this story that if salvation "is truly the work of God, it cannot be defective. It cannot fail to impact an individual's behavior. It cannot leave his desires unchanged or his conduct unaltered. It cannot result in a fruitless life. It is the work of God and will continue steadfastly from its inception to ultimate perfection (Phil. 1:6)" (p. 74).

MacArthur clearly charges those who reject lordship salvation with teaching that salvation is merely giving intellectual assent to Biblical facts. Earlier in the book, he leveled that charge against me (pp. 38, 45) and in this chapter, he accuses Dr. Tom Constable, a faculty member at Dallas Seminary, of the same thing. He quotes Constable's article entitled "The Gospel Message" in *Walvoord: A Tribute* and leaves the

impression that Constable believes that all that is required for a person to be saved is to believe facts.

Neither Tom Constable nor I believe that all that a person has to do to be saved is believe facts. In the bibliography to *The Gospel According to Jesus*, John includes the book I wrote on evangelism entitled *Evangelism: A Biblical Approach*. In that book I have a chapter entitled "What is Faith" in which I spell out very clearly that faith is more than mental assent. It is trust in the person of Jesus Christ (pp. 73-77). He never refers to it or, for that matter, the book on evangelism anywhere in his book, *The Gospel According to Jesus*.

In the chapter by Constable that MacArthur quotes, Constable quotes Chafer to define faith. His definition is "believing is the opposite of doing anything: it is trusting another instead" (p. 205). Throughout the article, Constable constantly refers to believing as trust. He says things like "there is nothing more for a man to do, but trust in Christ's work as being sufficient for his salvation (p. 204) . . . a person becomes a Christian when he transfers his trust from whatever he may have been relying on for salvation to Jesus Christ and what He did on the cross. This is an act of the whole man: intellect, emotion and will" (p. 206). MacArthur has simply misrepresented those whose viewpoint he is seeking to discredit.

What about MacArthur's handling of John 9? He is correct when he says, "spiritual sight depends on God's initiative and God's power, offered in divine and sovereign grace" (p. 73). He is also accurate when he points out that "teaching theology to a heathen will not bring him to faith in Christ" (p. 74). The question is: what did the blind man do to be saved--not what did it take for him to be healed? The *text* indicates that all he did was believe that Jesus was the Son of God (Jn. 9:35-38). The word translated "believe" means "trust."

MacArthur points out that the blind man worshipped as soon as he believed and concludes that this story is teaching that salvation is a supernatural work of God that cannot be defective (p. 74). It "*must* make a difference in the life of the one whose eyes have been opened" (p. 76). Is this based on the fact that the blind man worshipped one time after faith? There is no doubt that this man worshipped at least once after he believed (Jn. 9:38). Does that mean that all who came to Christ immediately worshipped Him? MacArthur didn't want to make the story of the woman at the well normative, but he insists this one is. By what logic?

THE RICH YOUNG RULER

In Matthew 19, a rich young ruler asked Christ, "Good Master, what good things shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?" (Mt. 19:16). Jesus asked him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but One, that is, God. But if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments" (Mt. 19:17). When the young man claimed he had done all that, Jesus told him to "go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me" (Mt. 19:21). MacArthur's analysis of this story is that Christ "gave a message of works and at this point did not even mention faith or the facts of redemption" (p. 79), "our Lord revealed nothing of Himself or the facts of the gospel. He did not invite the man to believe" (p. 83). According to MacArthur, the issue in the

story is “will this man obey the Lord? . . . Christ was saying ‘Are you going to do what I want you to do. Who will run your life, you or I?’ . . . He was telling the young man ‘unless I can be the highest authority in your life, there is no salvation for you’” (pp. 86, 87). This does not mean, MacArthur assures us, that a person must literally give away everything he owns to become a Christian, but a person does have to be willing to forsake all. “Jesus’ request of this man was simply meant to establish whether he was willing to submit to the sovereignty of Jesus over his life” (p. 87). MacArthur hastens to add that he believes salvation is by grace through faith, “but people with genuine faith do not refuse to acknowledge their sinfulness. They sense that they have offended the holiness of God and do not reject the lordship of Christ . . . saving faith is a commitment to leave sin and follow Jesus Christ at all costs. Jesus takes no one unwilling to come on those terms (p. 87) . . . there must be a *willingness* to obey” (p. 88).

Is it true that in this incident “our Lord revealed nothing of Himself” (p. 83), or “the facts of the gospel” (p. 83), or “the facts of redemption” (p. 79), or “faith” (p. 79), and instead He “gave him a message of works” (p. 79)? Was Christ’s message to the rich young ruler “unless I can be the highest authority in your life, there is no salvation for you” (pp. 86, 87)? Is the point of the passage that a person must be “willing to obey” in order to have eternal life? I think not.

When this young man asked Jesus Christ what he had to do to have eternal life, in essence Jesus Christ told him three things: 1) You must recognize who I am. That is the point of the question “Why do you call me good? No one is good but One, that is God” (Mt. 19:17). In order to have eternal life one must recognize that Jesus Christ is God (Jn. 20:31). 2) You must know that you are a sinner in need of a Savior. That’s why Jesus gave him the law (Mt. 19:17-19). Jesus was using the law lawfully (cf. 1 Tim. 1:8-11). The purpose of the law was to reveal sin (Rm. 3:20). 3) You must cease trusting everything else and trust Me. That is why the Lord told the rich young ruler to sell what he had and give it to the poor. An ancient Jewish proverb states “whom the Lord loves he makes rich.” The rich young ruler was of the opinion that God loved him and the proof of it was his riches. In that sense, he was trusting his riches for eternal life. The analogous situation today would be like telling someone trusting their church membership for eternal life to cancel their church membership and start trusting Christ.

In Mark’s account of this incident, after the young man walked away and the disciples expressed astonishment at what had taken place, Jesus told them, “Children, how hard it is for those who trust in riches to enter into the kingdom of God” (Mk. 10:24, NKJ). By “hard” Jesus meant it was impossible for He goes on to say “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. . . . With men it is impossible” (Mk. 10:25, 27). The words “for those who trust in riches” are not in some manuscripts, but they are in the majority of manuscripts. The point Jesus was making had to do with faith.

On what basis does MacArthur conclude that this story is teaching on the one hand that you must obey Christ (p. 86) and yet on the other it is only demanding willingness to obey (pp. 87, 88)? He asks “do we literally have to give away everything we own to become Christians?” His answer is “no, but we *do* have to be willing to forsake all (Lk. 14:33), meaning we cling to nothing that takes precedent over Christ” (p. 87). What in Matthew 19 or Luke 14:33 warrant the judgment that Christ is not asking for literal

obedience but only willingness to obey? MacArthur was eager to point out that when Jesus told Matthew to "follow me" he literally did it. Would Matthew have been saved if he had been willing to follow Christ, but hadn't actually done it? (Of course, Matthew 9 is not Matthew's call to salvation, but MacArthur believes it is; thus, this question is for the sake of making a point.)

The invitation to "follow me" is a call to discipleship, not conversion. The story of the rich young ruler is another illustration of that. Notice carefully that had the rich young ruler done literally what Christ told him to do he would have treasure in heaven *before* he followed Christ (Mt. 19:21). The young man's problem was that he was trusting his money. The Lord told him to give that away. At that point, he would have trusted Christ and had treasure in heaven. Then, after faith, Christ invited him to "follow me," that is, become His disciple.

ZACCHAEUS

In Luke 19, the encounter between Zacchaeus and Jesus Christ is recorded. Zacchaeus was seeking to see Jesus only to discover that Jesus was seeking to save him. Zacchaeus said, "Look, Lord, I give half of my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore him fourfold" (Lk. 19:8), and Jesus responded, "Today, salvation has come to this house because he also is a son of Abraham" (Lk. 19:9). MacArthur correctly concludes, "Salvation did not come to Zacchaeus because he gave his money away, but because he was a true son of Abraham, that is, a believer. He was saved by faith and not by works" (p. 95).

MacArthur also teaches that Zacchaeus' "instant and dramatic transformation" was the expected result of true faith. . . .The necessary result of God's saving work is a transformed person. . . .If such a change does not occur, there is no reason to think genuine salvation has taken place" (p. 96). Admittedly, Zacchaeus was instantly and dramatically transformed, but by what logic do we conclude "if such a change does not occur, there is no reason to think genuine salvation has taken place?" This is one story of one man's conversion. As MacArthur insisted concerning the case of the woman at the well, "we cannot isolate this passage and try to draft a model for a universal gospel presentation from it" (p. 49), nor can we isolate this passage in Luke and draft a model from it of the universal result of salvation. If we do, the result we must look for is that every convert must give half of his goods to the poor and restore fourfold anything he has ever stolen from everybody. What's normative? Is this passage normative? How do we know that? Who else in the New Testament did this? Answer: No one.

JUDAS

According to MacArthur, Judas is an illustration of a professing believer who was never genuinely saved. He is "a prime example of a professing believer who fell into absolute apostasy" (p. 99). He is "proof that one who is friendly to Jesus may yet turn against Him and thus condemn himself" (p. 100). "His faith was never genuine" (p. 102). By contrast, the disciples forsook Christ and fled, but they came back (pp. 103, 104).

“Judas was a false disciple. He was friendly to Jesus, but not committed, therefore, capable of the worst kind of betrayal. A true disciple may fail, but he will never turn against Christ” (p. 105).

There is no question that Judas was never saved. He was the son of perdition (Jn. 17:12). The Bible never says Judas had faith. Therefore, he cannot be used as an example of a false profession. He is an illustration of the fact that it is possible to be “friendly to Jesus” and not truly trust Him as Savior, but just because one man was friendly, and was even counted as a disciple, but ultimately betrayed Him, does not, by any stretch of the imagination, prove that “true believers *will* persevere.” According to MacArthur, “if a person turns against Christ, it is proof that person was never saved” (p. 98). Judas can’t illustrate what a true believer will or will not do. He wasn’t a true believer nor does the experience of the other disciples, in this case, prove that a “real disciple . . . may fail Christ, but will never turn against Him” (p. 105). There are believers who fall away, commit the sin unto death, and never come back to the Lord before their premature departure from this earth (1 Cor. 11:30).

THE CROWD

MacArthur’s view is that Christ’s gospel invitation in Matthew 11 was not an entreaty for sinners to “accept Christ.” Rather, it was a “command to repent and take on a yoke of submission” (p. 107). “This is an invitation to salvation, not just an appeal for believers to move into a deeper experience of discipleship” (p. 107). From this passage, MacArthur outlines five essential elements of genuine conversion: humility, revelation, repentance, faith and submission. MacArthur interprets the command “come to me” as a demand for “a complete turn-around, a full change of direction” (p. 111) as well as an imperative to believe in Christ (p. 112). The invitation to “take my yoke upon you” is an invitation to submission (p. 112) and it implies obedience (p. 113).

A careful analysis of Matthew 11 reveals that MacArthur has once again made two separate things the same thing. Sonship and discipleship are two different things. When Christ said “come to me” (Mt. 11:28) He was simply saying “believe in me” (Jn. 6:35). MacArthur accurately observes “to come to Jesus is to believe in Him” (p. 112). When a person does that, Jesus said he would have rest (Mt. 11:28). That’s salvation!

The next step after salvation is described in the next verse where Jesus said, “take my yoke upon you and learn from me” (Mt. 11:29). It should be obvious that Matthew 11:29 is not a reference to salvation. In the first place, verse 28 says Christ had given them rest. Taking the yoke is something that happens after receiving rest. In the second place, taking the yoke is to learn. A person does not learn in order to be saved. He learns after he is saved. That is what discipleship is all about. In fact, the word “disciple,” though not used in this passage, means to be a learner.

These nine conversations Jesus had with individuals do not teach lordship salvation after all. In fact, no passage or conversation of Jesus does. On the other hand, many verses, especially in the Gospel of John, emphatically declare that faith alone in Christ alone brings eternal life (cf. Jn. 3:16, 5:24, etc.), but what about the parables Jesus told?

THE PARABLES JESUS TOLD

Not all of the parables Jesus told dealt with salvation, but, according to MacArthur, several of them do. The parables he chooses to explain are used to defend lordship salvation. Again, let's listen to MacArthur's exposition of these parables and then let's look at the parables themselves.

THE SOILS

MacArthur interprets the first three types of soil in the parable of the sower in Matthew 13 as being illustrations of people who did not get saved. In his view, only the last fruit-bearing type is an illustration of those who were saved. The point he makes from this passage is that "fruit is the ultimate test of true salvation" (p. 127). He says "if there is no spiritual fruit, or if the fruit is bad, the tree must be rotten or, translating the imagery to the metaphor of a field, if the soil does not produce a crop, it is worthless ground, symbolic of an unredeemed heart" (p. 126). "Not every Christian will always bear as much fruit as he ought to or could, but everyone *is* fruitful to some degree. Christians are sometimes disobedient and, of course, they still sin, but ultimately believers are identifiable by their fruit" (p. 127).

How does MacArthur know that the Lord intended to teach that the first three types of soil represented people who were unconverted? Except in symbolism, which has to be interpreted, Matthew's account does not tell us about the spiritual condition of the four types of soils. Luke's account, however, does.

According to Luke's account, the Devil took the word out of the hearts of those by the wayside "lest they should believe and be saved" (Lk. 8:12). Therefore, we know that the first type was not saved. Luke's record reveals that the second type were those "who believe for a while" (Lk. 8:13). If the first type would have been saved by believing, and only believing, then we have every right to assume that if the second type believed they were saved even if they only continued for a while. Of the third type, it is said, they did not bring forth fruit to maturity (Lk. 8:14), implying they were saved, but immature. The fourth and final group, of course, were fruitful believers to one degree or another. The only way MacArthur can conclude that this passage is teaching that every believer must produce fruit to some degree is to import that concept into the passage. The passage itself does not say that; in fact, it says the exact opposite. It teaches that a believer can be unfruitful (cf. 2 Pet. 1:8, 9). Of course, the overall point of this parable is that we should not be unfruitful, but fruitful. Be good soil. Be a hearer and a doer of the Word so that you can be fruitful.

THE WHEAT AND THE TARES

According to MacArthur "the message of the wheat and tares is simply that God does not sanction any effort that would rid the world of unbelievers by force" (p. 131) "yet this parable is *not* saying that we should be unconcerned with the differences between wheat

and tares until the final judgment. It does not encourage us to accept tares as wheat. It does not sanction indifference about the sins of the lost, nor does it suggest we forget that there are weeds in the field and be inattentive to the peril they pose. It simply tells us to leave final judgment and retribution in the hands of the Lord and His angels. In the end, real wheat will inevitably be identified by the crop it produces. . . .The fruit they [believers] bear will be different from the fruit born by the children of the evil one" (p. 133).

MacArthur is correct in saying this parable is teaching that God will separate the wheat from the tares later and we should not, in the meantime, attempt to rid the world of unbelievers by force. He is also right when he says, "until its seed head was mature, it [the tare] was nearly impossible to distinguish from real wheat, even under the most careful scrutiny" (p. 130), which is precisely why fruit inspecting is such a difficult, if not sometimes impossible, job.

Think of it. A tare can look like wheat, an unbeliever can be moral and religious like a believer. That is one of the major reasons why we must point people to the work of Christ on the cross and not to their works and to the Word, not experience, for assurance.

THE TREASURE AND THE PEARL

Admitting that it is difficult to be dogmatic about the meaning of parables not specifically explained by the Lord, MacArthur's view is that the treasure and the costly pearl of Matthew 13 are teaching the cost of salvation. "Both parables make the point that a sinner who understands the priceless riches of the kingdom will gladly yield everything else he cherishes in order to obtain it" (p. 135). MacArthur's view is that salvation is an exchange: "Faith as He (Christ) characterizes it is nothing less than a complete exchange of all that we are for all that He is" (p. l35). "Thus in a sense, we pay the ultimate price for salvation. When our sinful self is nailed to a cross it is a total abandonment of self-will like the grain of wheat that falls to the ground and dies so that it can bear much fruit (cf. Jn. 12:24). It is an exchange of all that we are for all that Christ is. And it denotes implicit obedience, full surrender to the Lordship of Christ. Nothing else can qualify as saving faith" (p. 140).

If you insist that salvation is a free gift, MacArthur will agree, and yet he contends it is costly at the same time. He says "eternal life is indeed a free gift (Romans 6:23). Salvation cannot be earned with good deeds or purchased with money. It has already been bought by Christ who paid the ransom with His blood, but that does not mean there is no cost in terms of salvation's impact on the spiritual life. This paradox may be difficult, but it is nevertheless true: salvation is both free and costly" (p. 140). Is MacArthur's analysis accurate?

MacArthur regards the man who found the treasure in the field and the merchant seeking pearls as a sinner seeking salvation, but in the other parables of Matthew 13, for example the parables of the sower and of the wheat and the tares, the sower is the Son of Man (cf. 13:37). Therefore, it is more natural in this context to interpret the pearl hunter and the merchant as the Son of Man. Jesus Christ, the Son of Man, gave all, here symbolized by selling all to purchase His people, here represented by the treasure hidden in the field and the pearl. In Exodus, God called Israel "a special treasure to me" (Ex.

19:5 NKJ; cf. also Ps. 135:4). It is perfectly consistent with Scripture to speak of Christ purchasing us. It is incongruous to speak of us purchasing either Christ or salvation. If these parables are about the Son of Man and not about sinners, then MacArthur's interpretation is simply not correct. Besides, salvation is not an exchange (p. 135); it is a gift (Rom. 6:23). Salvation cannot be free and cost the same person at the same time.

THE PARABLE OF THE FIRST AND THE LAST

In Matthew 20:1-16, Jesus told a parable about a landowner who hired laborers for his vineyard. Though he hired them at different hours of the day, he paid them all the same wage, concluding that the last would be first and the first last. According to MacArthur, "the epistles describe different rewards for service, but that is not the point this parable makes. The issue here is the quality of eternal life" (p. 146). "Everyone who enters the kingdom has eternal life like everyone else" (p. 145).

He also says "the important truth to grasp is that saving faith is an exchange of all that we are for all that Christ is. We need to understand that this does not mean that we barter for eternal life. We do not buy salvation by surrendering our lives nor is the gift of eternal life given in proportion to the quality or the length of the life we surrender. Everyone who gives his all to Christ gets all Christ has to give in return" (p. 143).

The parable of the first and the last is about *work for pay*. Therefore, it is not about the gospel (Rom. 11:6). It would be much more in keeping with the imagery of this parable and the teaching of the New Testament to interpret this parable as a story about rewards. MacArthur's interpretation then, and his application to salvation, miss the point of this parable. The parable is not about salvation at all; it is about rewards.

THE LOST AND THE FOUND

The parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son in Luke 15 "make the point that God does not sit passively by while people are going to hell" (p. 150). "God is seeking the lost. Those who acknowledge their sin and turn from it will find Him running to them with open arms" (p. 155).

Concerning the prodigal son, MacArthur writes, "here is a perfect illustration of the nature of saving faith. Observe the young man's unqualified compliance, his absolute humility, and his unequivocal willingness to do whatever the father asks of him. The prodigal, who began by demanding an early inheritance, was now willing to serve his father as a bond slave. He made a complete turn about. His demeanor was one of unconditional surrender. A complete resignation of self and absolute submission to the father. This is the essence of saving faith . . . His repentance was a complete and total reversal. He became poor in spirit. He mourned over his sin. His arrogance gave way to meekness and humility. He was a different young man than the one who originally left home" (p. 153).

MacArthur is correct. The three parables of Luke 15 illustrate that God is seeking the lost. Jesus told these parables to answer the question of why He was eating with tax collectors and sinners (Lk.. 15:1). In essence, He was teaching that He ate with sinners

because they were lost and He was seeking them, but MacArthur's contention that the prodigal son is "a perfect illustration of the nature of saving faith" misses a critical observation. Is it not significant that the prodigal son thought about making a pledge of service (Lk. 15:19), but *the father didn't ask for it* and *would have rejected it*, because He accepted him as a son, not as a slave (cf. verse 22)? In fact, the son never told the father about his intention because the father was so glad to see him, he interrupted him (cf. verse 21). The son returned to the father and the father received him as he was and gave him the place of a son, not a slave. To be specific, no matter what the son intended the father's expectations were different. The son was received unconditionally based on the father's choice, not the son's intentions or behavior.

These five parables Jesus told do not teach lordship salvation. Some of them do contain grand and glorious truths concerning evangelism, like the desire of the father to save the lost, but they do not reveal that Jesus demanded that someone turn from sin and submit to His Lordship in order to be saved. In fact, some of them are not about salvation at all!

THE DOCTRINE JESUS TAUGHT

Ultimately, the answer to the question, "What must I do to be saved?" is going to come down to a definition of certain biblical terms like repentance, faith and discipleship. MacArthur deals with these terms in a major section of his book, which he calls, "Jesus Qualifies His Gospel." What does MacArthur say Jesus meant by repentance, true faith, discipleship, lordship and the Sermon on the Mount? Can his view be sustained from the meaning of those terms and from the text of Scripture?

REPENTANCE

MacArthur laments that writers like Ryrie, Constable and myself have "redefined repentance in a way that evacuates its moral ramifications." He goes on to say, they write it off as simply a change of mind about who Christ is. This kind of repentance has nothing to do with turning from sin or abandoning self. It is utterly devoid of any recognition of personal guilt, any intent to obey God or any desire for true righteousness" (p. 161). What then is repentance?

MacArthur admits that "literally it means 'afterthought' or 'change of mind,' but biblically its meaning does not stop there . . . it *always* speaks of a change of purpose and specifically a turning from sin. In the sense Jesus used it, repentance calls for a repudiation of the old life and a turning to God for salvation" (p. 162). "Repentance is also not simply a mental activity; genuine repentance involves the intellect, emotions and will" (p. 163).

MacArthur then quotes Geerhardus Vos who said, "Of the three words that are used in the Greek gospels to describe the process, one emphasizes the emotional element of regret, sorrow over the past evil course of life . . . a second expresses reversal of the entire mental attitude . . . the third denotes a change in direction of life, one goal being substituted for another" (pp. 163, 164). "No evangelism that omits the message of repentance can properly be called the gospel, for sinners cannot come to Jesus Christ apart from a radical change of heart, mind and will. That demands a spiritual crisis leading to a complete turnabout and ultimately a wholesale transformation. It is the only kind of conversion Scripture recognizes" (p. 167). "There is no salvation apart from repentance that renounces sin" (p. 168).

Thus, MacArthur teaches that repentance "always involves an element of remorse . . . it is a redirection of the human will, a purposeful decision to forsake all unrighteousness and pursue righteousness instead. Nor is repentance merely a human work, it is like every element of redemption, a sovereignly bestowed gift of God . . . Acts 11:18 . . . 2 Timothy 2:25. If God is the one who grants repentance it cannot be viewed as a human work" (p. 163).

Confused? In order to be saved you must change your mind, be sorry for your sin, turn from sin, forsake all unrighteousness and pursue righteousness. Yet, that's not a human work. God sovereignly bestows that on you. If that's the case, what then do you do to get God to give you repentance?

There are only two Greek words, not three, which are translated "repent" in the New Testament. The third word Geerhardus Vos mentioned is never translated "repent" and means "to turn or be converted." It is obviously different than repentance, because it is used in the same sentence with repentance (cf. Acts 3:19, 11:21). One of the two words rendered "repent" in the New Testament means "to regret, to be sorry for something you've done," but it is never used as the condition for salvation (it only occurs six times. Cf. Mt. 21:29, 21:32, 27:3, 2 Cor. 7:8 (twice), Heb. 7:21. In one of these references Judas repented—Mt. 27:3). The error of Geerhardus Vos's evaluation is that he "dumps" the meaning of three words into one meaning. He then makes that meaning the definition of repent every time it occurs.

The word translated "repent" that is used in soteriological passages simply describes an inward change of thinking or attitude. Mantey of Greek grammar fame said, "It means to think differently or to have a different attitude toward sin and God, etc." (*Basic Christian Doctrine*, p. 193). Westcott, the famous Greek scholar, said, "It follows, therefore, that 'repentance from dead works' expresses that complete change of mind--of spiritual attitudes--which leads the believer to abandon these works and seek other support for life" (*The Epistles to The Hebrews*, Brooke Foss Westcott, p. 144). Plummer calls repentance a "change of mind" (*The Gospel According to St. Luke*, Alfred Plummer, p. 86). Actually Geerhardus Vos, the author quoted by MacArthur, agrees on this particular point. He defines the one word translated "repent" in salvation verses as "reversal of the entire mental attitude" (cf. p. 163).

In my book on evangelism, I summed it up this way, "When someone changes his mind, there may be emotions--and there may not be. And when someone changes his mind, a change in the course of his action is expected, but both of these things are *results* of repentance and not the nature of repentance" (*Evangelism: A Biblical Approach*, p. 66). Later in that chapter, I pointed out that Berkhof said, "According to Scripture, repentance is wholly an inward act and should not be confounded with a change of life that proceeds from it. Confession of sin and reparation of wrongs are *fruits* of repentance" (*Systematic Theology*, p. 487). Berkhof is right. It is obvious that repentance is *not* a change in behavior because the Scripture says repent and bear fruit worthy of repentance (cf. Lk. 3:8, Acts 26:20). Therefore, a repentance by definition is not a change of behavior. Repentance is the root, change of behavior is the fruit. (For a more detailed discussion of the subject of repentance, see "What is Repentance" in *Evangelism: A Biblical Approach*, p. 65-72).

TRUE FAITH

According to MacArthur, the error of today's popular approach to evangelism is that "the gospel appeal is tacked onto a wholly inadequate explanation of what it means to believe. The modern definition of faith eliminates repentance, erases the moral element of believing, obliviates the work of God in the sinner's heart, makes an ongoing trust in the Lord optional" (p. 171). His view is that the Scripture describes faith as a gift (Acts 11:18, 2 Tim. 2:25, Eph. 2:8, 9, Phil. 1:29, Jn. 6:44). Therefore, "as a divine gift, faith is neither transient or impotent. It is an abiding quality that guarantees its endurance till the end" (p. 173) and it obeys. "The faith God begets includes both the volition and the

ability to comply with His will (compare Philippians 2:13). In other words, faith encompasses obedience" (p. 173). He then quotes Berkhof who, he says, sees three elements in genuine faith--an intellectual element which is the understanding of the truth, an emotional element which is the conviction and affirmation of the truth "and a volitional element (*Fiducia*) which is the determination of the will to obey truth" (p. 173). MacArthur then concludes, "the real believer will obey. Because we all retain the vestiges of sinful flesh no one will perfectly obey . . . but the desire to do the will of God will be ever present in true believers . . . faith always produces a longing to obey" (p. 174). "Clearly the biblical concept of faith is inseparable from obedience" (p. 174). He quotes Bultmann who said "to believe is to obey" (p. 175). He insists that "obedience is the inevitable manifestation of true faith" (p. 175).

MacArthur claims "the beatitudes of Matthew 5:3-12 reveal the character of true faith as well as any passage of Scripture I know" (p. 176). Here, then, is MacArthur's view of what faith is like: "Its foundational characteristic is humility--poverty of spirit, a brokenness, a knowledge of spiritual bankruptcy--genuine believers see themselves as sinners; they know they have nothing to offer God that will buy His favor. That is why they mourn (Matthew 5:4). With the sorrow that accompanies true repentance, it crushes the believer into meekness (verse 5). He hungers and thirsts for righteousness (verse 6). As the Lord satisfies that hunger, he makes the believing one merciful (verse 6), pure in heart (verse 7), and a peacemaker (verse 9). The believer is ultimately persecuted and reviled for righteousness' sake (verse 10). That is Jesus' description of true faith. It starts with humility and reaches fruition in obedience. The obedience true faith produces is more than external; it is an obedience that issues from the heart . . . this kind of righteousness does not merely avoid acts of adultery; it goes so far as to avoid adulterous thought. It eschews hatred the same as murder" (p. 177).

MacArthur concludes, "faith obeys, unbelief rebels. The fruit of one's life reveals whether a person is a believer or an unbeliever. There is no middle ground. Merely knowing and affirming facts apart from obedience to the truth is not believing in the biblical sense" (p. 178).

MacArthur's explanation of faith is contrary to the traditional Protestant definition of faith and his support from Berkhof is not accurately represented. An evaluation of his handling of faith necessitates at least three items: 1) an explanation of the classic theological definition of faith, 2) an examination of the Berkhof quotation, and 3) an exploratory question.

In his commentary on Romans, Charles Hodge, the famous nineteenth-century Princeton theologian gave the definition of saving faith that has been recognized by Protestant theologians for hundreds of years. He said:

> That faith, therefore, which is connected with salvation includes knowledge, that is, a perception of the truth and its qualities, assent or the persuasion of truth of the object of faith; and trust or reliance. The exercise or state of mind expressed by the word faith as used in the scripture is not mere mental assent or mere trust. It is the intelligent perception, reception and reliance on truth as revealed in the gospel (*Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, Charles Hodges p. 29).

In short, the classical theological definition of faith is 1) recognition of truth, 2) reception of truth, and 3) reliance on truth. Faith is trust, not obedience. The faith that saves is trust in Jesus

Christ and His death as the payment for sin plus nothing else.

MacArthur quoted Berkhof claiming that he said that the third element, the volitional element, in faith was "the determination of the will to obey truth" (p. 173). Notice, he did not enclose those words with quotation marks. What did Berkhof actually say? Under the heading "The Elements of Faith" he lists a) an intellectual element, b) an emotional element, and c) a volitional element (pp. 503-505). Under this third element, Berkhof wrote:

> This is the crowning element of faith. Faith is not merely a matter of the intellect, nor of the intellect and the emotions combined; it is a matter of the will, determining the direction of the soul, an act of the soul going out toward its object and appropriating this. Without this activity, the object of faith, which the sinner recognizes as true and real and entirely applicable to his present needs, remains outside himself and its saving faith. It is a matter of life and death that the object be appropriated. This third element consists in a personal trust in Christ as Savior and Lord including a surrender of the soul as guilty and defiled to Christ and a reception and appropriation of Christ as the source of pardon and spiritual life (*Systematic Theology*, L. Berkhof p. 505).

There is more to Berkhof's quote. He continues throughout the rest of page 505 and spills over to page 506. Nowhere in this extended paragraph on the volitional element of faith does the word obey appear one single time. On the contrary, he describes this third element of faith as "personal trust . . . appropriation of Christ" and "a surrender of the soul as guilty and defiled" but nothing, absolutely nothing, is said about obedience. In fact, Berkhof defines the volitional element of faith as *Fiducia*, a Latin word which means trust. MacArthur did a disservice to Berkhof.

I have a nagging question. If the Beatitudes of Matthew 5 reveal the true character of faith, as well as any passage, why doesn't "faith" occur there at least once? Isn't that passage talking about being blessed, a Greek word, which means "happy," rather than being saved?

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT (Matthew 7:13-14)

As MacArthur explains it, "salvation *is* a choice each person must make, but it is not just a momentary decision in the sense we often think of it . . . in the culmination of all He had to say on the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord demands that each person choose between following the world on the easy well-traveled road, or following Him on the difficult road. You will not find a plainer statement of the gospel according to Jesus anywhere in the Scripture" (p. 180).

MacArthur teaches that "Christ is the gate, He is the Way" (page 181). For the first time in his book he finally gets around to mentioning the gospel as defined by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15. He accurately observes "that it is the sole basis of salvation. Christ's death on the cross paid the price for our sins (1 Corinthians 15:3) and His resurrection revealed that He had conquered death (1 Corinthians 15:20)" (p. 181).

Yet, MacArthur insists "entering the narrow gate is not easy." He points out that when asked "Lord, are there just a few who are being saved?" the Lord replied, "Strive to enter by the narrow door" (Luke 13:23). He then adds that the Greek word translated "strive" implies "an agonizing, intense, purposeful struggle" (p. 182). "The kingdom of God is not for people who want Jesus without any change in their living. It is only for those who seek it with all their hearts, those who agonize to enter. Many who approach the gate turn away upon finding out the cost. Lest someone object that this is salvation of human effort, remember it is only the enablement of divine grace that empowers a person to pass through the gate. In the brokenness of divinely granted repentance in the poverty of a divinely wrought humble spirit, God's power becomes the resource" (p. 183).

MacArthur is adamant that "salvation requires total transformation . . . it produces a changed life (p. 183) . . . when a person becomes a Christian he declares war on hell and hell fights back. Following Christ can cost one's very life--it will certainly cost one's life in a spiritual sense. The faint hearted and compromisers need not apply" (p. 185).

There is no question that at the end of the Sermon on the Mount the Lord lays before the people two gates, two ways leading to two destinies. As MacArthur states, Christ is the Gate and the Way, but he assumes that the "striving" to enter is a reference to agonizing over changing one's life-style. That is not necessarily true at all. The way to enter is to trust Jesus Christ. The point of the striving is to earnestly seek to do so, make it a priority and avoid being nonchalant about it. The point Jesus is making is strive to enter, which is done by faith, not strive to change your life. Wouldn't striving to change your life-style be salvation by self-effort?

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT (Matthew 7:21-23)

Jesus warned that not everyone who says "Lord, Lord" or even does mighty miracles will enter the kingdom of heaven (Mt. 7:21-22). He will tell them "I never knew you; you practiced lawlessness (Mt. 7:23) and did not do the will of my Father in heaven (Mt. 7:21)." MacArthur's comment on this passage is "the lesson here is that if a person lives an unrighteous life of disobedience, it doesn't matter what he says or what good things he has done, he is an unbeliever in danger of eternal damnation. This is a very strong admonition, but it is an indispensable part of the gospel according to Jesus." By that he means that one who says without doing and hears without obeying is not a believer (pp. 189-92). "This is a final repetition of the central theme on the Sermon on the Mount--that those who do not manifest genuine righteousness will not enter the kingdom of heaven" (p. 192).

Granted, the people of whom Jesus spoke in Matthew 7:21-23 practiced lawlessness, but that is not their root problem. Their fundamental problem is that they had not done "the will of my Father in heaven" (Mt. 7:21) and consequently they had never met Christ (Mt. 7:23). The question is "what is the will of my Father in heaven?" That is an unusual

phrase in the New Testament. The Scriptures speak often of the will of God, but only rarely of the will of the Father. Jesus, Himself, tells us, "This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at the last day. And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day" (Jn. 6:39-40). The will of the Father is to believe in the Son and thus know Him. That is the point of Matthew 7:21-23.

Notice carefully that MacArthur is teaching that it is an "indispensable" (p. 189) part of the gospel to obey Christ. MacArthur defines the one who obeys as "he who thinks out the responsibility, he who understands what he is committing to and he wants to do it right. This is the man who hears and obeys (Matthew 7:24)" (p. 194). Even though MacArthur repeatedly says he does not believe in salvation by works, what he says in this chapter, as well as other places in the book, sounds like he does. What he writes is careless and confusing at best and salvation by works at worst. He did say someone would accuse him of teaching salvation by works (page xiii). One can certainly see why he would think that.

DISCIPLESHIP

MacArthur's thesis is that "every Christian is a disciple" (p. 196). Any distinction between believer and disciple is "purely artificial" (page 196) and a call to Christian discipleship explicitly demands "total dedication. It is full commitment with nothing knowingly or deliberately held back" (p. 197). What follows is a bit confusing. At one point, he seems to be arguing that these are requirements of discipleship or the conditions of salvation. For example, he says, "Our Lord still taught them the implications of their faith in salvation and constantly reminded them of the commitment they had made when they chose to follow Him" (p. 198). On the other hand, he points out that discipleship means confessing Christ before men and then asks, "Does that mean confession before men is a condition of becoming a true Christian? No, but it means that a characteristic of every genuine believer is that he or she *will* confess Christ before men . . . The confession is a human work; it is prompted by God, subsequent to the act of believing but inseparable from it. Again, it is a characteristic of true faith, not an additional condition of salvation" (pp. 198, 199).

He denies that confession is a condition for becoming a Christian, but he declares it to be "inseparable" from the act of believing. Unless "believing" is not necessary for salvation, this is utter confusion!

The fallacy in MacArthur's argument is that there is no distinction between being "a believer" and "being a disciple," between sonship and discipleship, but the Scriptures teach the moment a person believes he is given the gift of eternal life (Jn. 3:16, 3:36, etc.). Being a disciple is something entirely different. The Greek word translated "disciple" means learner, pupil. When used to designate a learner of Christ, the term disciple has a variety of meanings. In a sense, its meaning evolves. At first, it is used in a general sense of anyone who learns from Christ (Mt. 8:21, Lk. 16:17, Jn. 4:1). Apparently, some of these disciples were not even saved (Jn. 6:60-66). All of these learned from Christ, but they did not travel with Him. The word disciple is also used

specifically of the twelve apostles who forsook their occupations and traveled with Christ (Mt. 4:18-20, Mt. 10:1, etc.). Thus, in the gospels, a disciple was anyone from a learner who did not trust Christ to a constant companion who traveled with Him. Some obviously did not learn very much; therefore, Christ had to define a true learner, that is, a genuine disciple.

To truly learn, a person must do more than call himself a student and listen to a teacher. There is a vast difference between enrolling in a class and actually learning the lesson. In the case of learning from Christ, one must begin by trusting in Him (Jn. 8:30), but simply trusting Christ for eternal life does not guarantee that the person will learn from Him; thus, "Jesus said to those Jews who believed in Him, 'If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed'" (Jn. 8:31). The word translated "indeed" means "truly." The true disciple is not only one who has trusted Christ (Jn. 8:30), but one who also commences to obey the commands of Christ (Jn. 8:31). In other words, Jesus told those who believed, and who therefore had eternal life: Now if you really want to learn, you must continue in My word, that is, obey Me. There is a difference, then, in being "a believer" and in being "a disciple."

It ought to be transparently obvious that there is a difference between being a believer and being a disciple. The moment a person trusts Christ, he is given the gift of eternal life (Jn. 4:10, Rom. 6:23). He is justified "freely" (Rom. 3:24). It is "without cost" (Rev. 22:17 NASV). On the other hand, to be a disciple costs you (Lk. 14:28). This is not a paradox, it is a simple statement of fact.

If there is still any doubt about there being a difference between being a believer and being a disciple, consider Matthew 28:19, 20, carefully. Clustered around the command to "make disciples" are three participles: going, baptizing and teaching. Going includes introducing people to Christ (compare Mk. 16:15, 16). Baptizing identifies a believer with the body of believers, like a wedding band identifies the bearer as married. Teaching, of course, is instruction. The discipling process, then, involves introduction to the person of Christ, identification with the body of Christ and instruction in the commands of Christ. To say the same thing another way, in order for a person to be a disciple, he must trust Christ, be baptized, and begin to obey His commandments. If being a disciple is the same thing as being a believer, then one must be baptized and obey the commands of Christ in order to go to heaven.

LORDSHIP

MacArthur concedes that "certainly the word *Lord* means deity wherever Scripture calls Jesus 'Lord' in connection with the gospel message. That Christ is God is a fundamental component of the gospel message. No one who denies the deity of Christ can be saved (I John 4:2, 3)" (p. 208). Then he says, "but inherent in the idea of deity is authority, dominion and the right to command. A person living in rebellion against Christ's authority does not acknowledge Him as Lord in any sense (compare Titus 1:16)" (pp. 208, 209). Insisting, then, that Lordship "includes the ideas of dominion, authority, sovereignty and the right to govern," MacArthur contends that implicit in the phrase "confess . . . Jesus as Lord" in Romans 10:9 is the idea that "people who come to Christ

for salvation must do so in obedience to Him, that is, with a willingness to surrender to Him as Lord" (p. 207).

The word "Lord" in the New Testament has a variety of meanings including "sir," "owner," "master," and "God." When used of Christ, it often means "God." The reason for this, and the proof of this, is simple. In the Old Testament, the Jews did not pronounce the personal name of God. Instead, they said "Lord." In the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the term "Lord" was used for God's name; thus, the word "Lord" meant simply God. By calling Jesus Christ "the Lord Jesus Christ," the New Testament is attributing deity to Him. That is not just the opinion of Dispensationalists. No less than all these agree: Bishop Westcott, B. B. Warfield, J. Gresham Machen and, more recently, the article in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (for quotations and references see *Lordship Salvation--Is It Biblical*? by G. Michael Cocoris, pp. 13, 15). As I concluded in that booklet on Lordship Salvation published in 1983:

> The point is that the New Testament is claiming that Jesus Christ is Lord, that is, that He is God and that as the God-man, He is our Savior. The word "Lord" in the phrase, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ," is no different than a modern equivalent such as, "put confidence in President Reagan." The term "President" is his title. It indicates his position and his ability to follow through on promises. In a similar fashion, the term "Lord," when applied to Jesus Christ, indicates His position as God and thus His ability to save us and grant us eternal life (p. 15).

Perhaps an illustration would help. Using the method of MacArthur, someone could say "We are to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. The meaning of Christ is that He is the future Davidic King in the kingdom. Therefore, the implication is if you do not believe in Christ as the future king you cannot be saved."

Neither the terms Jesus used, nor the doctrine that He taught, can sustain the conclusion that the gospel according to Jesus was lordship salvation. Rather, Jesus Himself said: Whoever believes in the only begotten Son has everlasting life (Jn. 3:16).

APPENDIX 1

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO THE APOSTLES

In a brief appendix, MacArthur contends that the gospel according to the apostles was the same as the gospel according to Jesus. That's obviously true (Gal. 1:11-12). The problem is that he has purported the apostles preaching the same garbled gospel that he has put into the mouth of Jesus Christ. That's not true. In order to prove his case, he practices the same kind of exposition with passages in the epistles as he did with passages in the gospels. For example, he quotes Romans 6 and concludes that Paul "saw all believers as essentially obedient--not free from sin or sinless, but free from the tyranny of sin and servants of righteousness" (p. 215). He conveniently fails to mention that in the very next chapter, Paul said of himself, "I am carnal, sold under sin" (Rom. 7:14). Furthermore, Paul admitted that there was a law in his members that brought him "into captivity to the law of sin" (Rom. 7:23). How could anyone read Romans and possibly conclude that all believers were free from the tyranny of sin? There are great, grand and glorious truths in the Book of Romans, truths that every Christian ought to follow, but the reality is the next chapter after Romans 6 is Romans 7 and the next book after Romans is 1 Corinthians!

Take another example. MacArthur boldly proclaims, "For one ultimately and finally to fall away from the faith proves that person never really was redeemed to begin with" (p. 216). To support his claim he quotes Colossians 1:22 and 23. These verses speak of God reconciling us to Himself so that He may "present you holy and blameless and irreproachable in His sight if indeed you continue in the faith." (Colossians 1:22, 23). Paul is not saying that a believer will be presented if he continues in the faith. He is saying he will only be presented holy, blameless and irreproachable in His sight if he continues in the faith. He is not saying that a believer must continue in the faith to be presented period. He is saying that a believer must continue if he is to be presented mature in Christ. The proof, that is Paul's meaning, comes later in the passage when he says, "Him (Christ) we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus" (Col. 1:28). The word translated "present" in Colossians 1:22 is the same as that translated "present" in Colossians 1:28. Both verses are talking about our presentation before the Lord at the judgment seat of Christ. Colossians 1:28 proves conclusively that our being presented mature is the object of Christ's death and Paul's preaching and is conditioned upon continuance in the faith. The implication is that a believer can be presented immature (cf. a verse like 1 Jn. 2:28).

There is more. MacArthur calls James 4:7-10 "perhaps the most comprehensive invitation to salvation in the epistles" (p. 218). If James 4:7-10 is an invitation to salvation then in order to be saved one must "cleanse" his hands, "purify" his heart, "lament," "mourn," and "weep!" (cf. Jas. 4:8, 9). Do all have to actually weep to be saved? No! This passage is not an invitation to salvation; it is not addressed to unbelievers. It is addressed to worldly Christians (Jas. 4:1-5). In the next verse, he addresses the readership as "brethren" (Jas. 4:11).

MacArthur's view of 1 John is that it was written to people who were "struggling with assurance" (p. 219) and therefore John gave them a moral test and a doctrinal test to see if they were truly saved. "The moral test requires obedience (p. 219), the doctrinal test that John gave relates to Jesus' deity and Lordship" (p. 219). If John the apostle were writing to people to give them tests to see whether or not they were saved, then he gave them the answers to the exam before he gave them the exam. He says he knew for sure their sins were forgiven (1 Jn. 2:12-14). The real issue in I John is that the Apostle John is concerned that these believers abide in the doctrine of Christ (1 Jn. 2:24) and in the person of Christ (1 Jn. 2:28).

MacArthur concludes, "The gospel according to Jesus is the gospel according to the apostles" (p. 220). That is correct. The gospel Jesus preached was the gospel of salvation through faith (Jn. 3:16). That is the same gospel preached by the apostles (cf. Rom. 3:28, Jas. 2:23, 1 Pet. 2:21, 1 Jn. 3:23).

What MacArthur does not do is point out that there is only one passage in all of the New Testament that deliberately defines the gospel in detail. That passage is 1 Corinthians 15:1-8, which defines the gospel as the death of Christ for our sins and His resurrection from the dead. The apostles, especially Paul, made much of Christ's death and resurrection (Acts 17:3-4, 1 Cor. 2:2, Gal. 2:21, 3:1, Eph. 1:7, Heb. 9:14, 1 Pet. 1:19, 1:7, etc.) and the fact that salvation is by faith (cf. Rom. 3:28, Gal. 2:16, Eph. 2:8, 9, Jas. 2:23, 1 Jo. 5:13, etc.), which is precisely what Jesus told them to do (cf. Lk. 24:46-48, Mk. 16:15, 16).

MacArthur's view of the gospel according to Jesus was not the gospel preached by Jesus or by the apostles. MacArthur has said that he expected some would accuse him of "teaching salvation by works" (p. xiii). Can you imagine anyone accusing the apostles of preaching salvation by works? The fact is Paul was accused of preaching a gospel so free that it allowed men to continue in sin (Rom. 3:8, 6:1). Further, the fact that MacArthur has anticipated being accused of teaching salvation by works is proof that he is not preaching the gospel according to Paul, which was the same as the gospel according to Jesus (Gal. 1:11-12).

APPENDIX 2

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO HISTORIC CHRISTIANITY

In a second appendix, MacArthur claims, “the greatest saints throughout the centuries of church history have repudiated the notion that salvation effects anything less than the complete transformation of a believer’s character, behavior and way of life” (p. 222). Several observations must be kept in mind concerning church history. In the first place, all evangelicals agree that the Scripture, not church history, is our only authority for faith and practice. Keep that in mind in this discussion, and in every other doctrinal discussion you will ever have.

Secondly, there is no doubt that many throughout church history, including some great saints, have taught that salvation effects the complete transformation of a believer’s behavior. Does that mean that all the people quoted or referred to in this appendix would agree with MacArthur’s system of salvation? Would these same saints agree with MacArthur concerning the requirements of salvation, as well as the result of salvation? If they read his book would they applaud or would they be appalled and accuse him of teaching salvation by works? Not all the great saints MacArthur quotes would subscribe to MacArthur’s system of salvation. For example, Augustine taught that a person could be regenerate, but not elect. A regenerate person could be lost, but an elect person could not (that certainly is a different view!). Luther, of course, did not believe in the perseverance of the saints as MacArthur describes it in his book.

Thirdly, consider the saints who are cited, twenty-four in all. Four lived prior to the Protestant Reformation, a period covering fourteen hundred years. Four—Luther, Melanchthon, Zwingli, and Calvin—were Reformers. As many as fourteen of the remaining sixteen were either Puritans or heavily influenced by Puritan theology. As MacArthur states, “The Puritans, in particular, wrote much about the nature of saving faith and the role of righteous works in the life of the believer” (p. 228). The appendix on “the gospel according to historic Christianity” is a clue as to where MacArthur got his gospel. It is not the gospel according to Jesus or the apostles. It is more accurately “the gospel according to the Puritans,” but there are multiplied thousands, yea millions, of believers, many of whom could be called “great saints,” who would not embrace Puritan theology or lordship salvation.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

In his book, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, Dr. John MacArthur, Jr. refutes easy believism and supposedly represents the gospel of Jesus by teaching a system of salvation that consists of four basic tenets: 1) God gives repentance, faith, commitment and obedience, 2) there will be an immediate perceivable, observable transformation of behavior, 3) true believers may momentarily fall but they will ultimately endure to the end, and 4) if a person falls away he was never genuinely saved. In short, salvation is the work of God and, therefore, it will result in a transformed life, which will endure.

The Gospel According to Jesus raises a number of critical, current issues, namely: easy believism and the lack of godly living among church members today, the interpretation of various passages in the gospels, the meaning of the terms for and results of salvation, God's part in salvation, plus questions concerning the teachings of the epistles and the position of men throughout church history. The book also creates several practical problems.

Let's evaluate these issues and MacArthur's system of salvation.

MacARTHUR MISREPRESENTS DISPENSATIONALISTS

MacArthur is deeply concerned about easy believism and the lack of godly living among church members today and rightly so. There is an easy believism, which teaches that all a person has to do to be saved is believe the facts of the gospel, raise a hand, pray a prayer, sign a card or walk an aisle. Many have gone through such a procedure and came out on the other side as unregenerate as they were when they entered. Furthermore, there is simply no question that many professing Christians are living ungodly lives. Open, overt sin is an all-too-common occurrence in evangelical churches today. As I said in the preface, I have been concerned about easy believism virtually all of my Christian life and have written against it before MacArthur's book was published (compare the chapter entitled, "Don't Ask Jesus to Come Into Your Heart" in my book *Evangelism: A Biblical Approach*). John and I are in agreement about easy believism (decisionism).

MacArthur blames the current situation in the church on dispensationalism in general, and Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer, the founder of Dallas Theological Seminary, in particular. Is this accurate? Do Dispensationalists teach easy believism as defined by MacArthur?

Men named in this book like Chafer, Ryrie, Hodges, Constable and me, have not and do not now teach that all a person has to do to be saved is believe facts. We have all taught, and do now teach, that true conversion comes about when a person is convicted of his sin, understands that Jesus Christ—God in the flesh—died for sin, and arose again from the dead, and *trusts* in Jesus Christ, and Him alone, for the forgiveness of his sin and eternal life.

What MacArthur fails to understand is that there are really three, not two, positions on salvation among evangelicals. In his book he constantly attacks easy believism which needs to be corrected, but then he assumes that because he has defeated what I prefer to call decisionism, he has established the only alternative, namely lordship salvation. There

is, however, a third alternative, namely, that what a sinner needs to do in order to be saved is recognize his sin and *trust* Jesus Christ as his or her Savior. The closest MacArthur comes to acknowledging such a position is in a footnote where he says that Blauvelt defines faith as "trusting Christ for everlasting life." MacArthur adds, "It is difficult to see how such faith apart from any kind of commitment differs from 'mere verbal assent or mental acquiescence'" (p. 171). That is precisely MacArthur's problem. He does not understand that there are three positions, not two: 1) lordship salvation, 2) gospel of the grace of God, and 3) easy believism. The following chart captures the essences of each view:

Lordship Salvation	Grace	Easy Believism
Turn from sin and submit to Christ	Trust Christ	Make a decision

MacArthur also constantly misrepresents Dispensationalists in that he says they believe a person could be saved *intending* to live in sin. None of the men quoted in his book believe that.

One other illustration: MacArthur quotes Chafer as saying that grace is "the Christian's liberty to do precisely as he chooses" (p. 31). What MacArthur omits is that *in the same paragraph* Chafer also said, "But God has provided a sufficient safeguard which consists in the fact that the divine ideal is first wrought in the heart: 'For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure'" (*Grace*, Lewis Sperry Chafer, p. 345). MacArthur again misrepresents what others teach.

MacArthur has gone too far in suggesting that Dispensationalists have created easy believism, which has ruined the purity of the church. Dispensationalists have not taught easy believism. Besides, nondispensationalists who predate Chafer have been accused of easy believism (cf. J. I. Packer's comments in the Foreword, p. ix).

MacARTHUR HAS MISINTERPRETED THE NEW TESTAMENT

The conversations Christ had, the parables He told and the doctrine He taught do not prove that a person must forsake all known sin and submit to the ruler ship of Christ in order to be saved. (Compare the chapters in this paper on those subjects.) MacArthur repeatedly reads material into passage after passage and parable after parable. Furthermore, he redefines grace, repentance and faith. According to MacArthur grace is God doing everything. He has redefined repentance to include sorrow from sin and turning from sin, which it does not. He has redefined faith to mean obedience. (Compare especially the chapter in this paper on "The Doctrine of Jesus.") MacArthur has gone too far in saying that repentance always consists of deep sorrow for sin and that faith means obedience.

Moreover, he eliminates the concept of the carnal Christian. According to him a person must always be immediately transformed and must persevere to the end. Does not the New Testament teach some fall into a sin unto death? (1 Jn. 5:16, 1 Cor. 11:30, Acts 5:1-11.)

To say the same thing another way, there are two issues: the requirement for salvation and the result of salvation (ultimately this debate will center on: 1) the definition of saving faith and 2) the relationship of justification and sanctification).

The Requirement of Salvation. What must I do to be saved? The answer *The Gospel According to Jesus* gives is that a sinner must count the cost and be prepared to obey (p. 63). There is a great price to be paid (p. 62). The sinner must be broken and have a deep sorrow for sin (p. 186). He must confess and forsake his sin (p. 58). He cannot harbor or hold onto any sin (p. 85). He will be ashamed of it (p. 86). "Saving faith is a commitment to leave sin and follow Jesus Christ at all costs. Jesus takes no one unwilling to come on those terms" (p. 87). This act of faith takes on a yoke of submission (pp. 107, 112). It demands "total dedication," "full commitment with nothing knowingly or deliberately held back" (p. 197). It is "total self denial--to the point of willingly dying for His sake" (page 201). Furthermore, faith "encompasses obedience" (p. 173). "Obedience to divine authority is a prerequisite of entry into the kingdom. Clearly, His Lordship is an integral part of the message of salvation" (p. 204). "It is clear that people who come to Christ for salvation must do so in obedience to Him, that is, with a willingness to surrender to Him as Lord" (p. 207). The faith that saves is "a faith that obeys" (p. 168).

If the advice of *The Gospel According to Jesus* is followed, then instead of using John 3:16 to lead someone to Christ, you should use the Beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount for, as the author explains, "the Beatitudes of Matthew 5:3-12 reveal the character of true faith as well as any passage of Scripture I know" (p. 176). That should be followed up with James 4:7-10 because "perhaps the most comprehensive invitation to salvation in the epistles comes in James 4:7-10" (p. 218). Neither Matthew 5:3-12, nor James 4:7-10, uses the word "faith" one single time!

What is the requirement for salvation? The New Testament teaches that a person must be convicted of his sin (Jn. 16:8-11). He must understand the gospel. There is only one passage in the New Testament that defines the gospel, namely 1 Corinthians 15:1-8. From that passage it is evident that the essence of the gospel is that Christ died for our sins and arose from the dead. Then a person must *trust* Jesus Christ (Jn. 3:16, etc.). Faith in the New Testament is simple trust in Jesus Christ for eternal life. Mental assent to the facts of the gospel is not enough. One must not only believe those facts, he must trust, depend on, rely on Jesus Christ, plus nothing for eternal life.

The ultimate issue is the definition of saving faith. MacArthur redefines faith to include obedience. His view is that the faith that saves is the faith that obeys. That is the view of the Roman Catholic Church, except they say that the obedience is to the church. That's the view of the Church of Christ, except they teach that obedience includes baptism. That's the view of the Seventh Day Adventist, except they preach that obedience includes keeping Saturday as the Sabbath. The truth is the faith that saves is the faith that trusts Jesus Christ for the gift of eternal life.

By the way, MacArthur attacks easy believism for using nonbiblical terminology (cf. p. 21), but by the end of the book, he has replaced biblical terminology with a set of nonbiblical terms of his own, such as submit, surrender, etc.

The Result of Salvation. According to the book, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, "the necessary result of God's saving work is a transformed person . . . implicit in that change of heart is a new set of desires—a desire to please God, to obey, and to reflect His

righteousness. If such a change does not occur, there is no reason to think genuine salvation has taken place" (p. 96). Furthermore, "those whose faith is genuine will prove their salvation is secure by persevering to the end in the way of righteousness and . . . true believers will persevere. If a person turns against Christ it is proof that person was never saved . . . no matter how convincing a person's testimony might seem, once he becomes apostate he has demonstrated irrefutably that he was never saved" (p. 98). It is not that a Christian never sins "but rather that when he does sin he inevitably returns to the Lord to receive forgiveness and cleansing" (page 104). (In the words of another, "The faith that fails before it finishes was flawed from the first.") "Fruit is the ultimate test of true salvation . . . everyone is fruitful to some degree. Christians are sometimes disobedient and, of course, they still sin but ultimately believers are identifiable by their fruit" (p. 127). "If repentance is genuine we can expect it to produce observable results" (page 166). The faith that is given by God "has an abiding quality that guarantees its endurance to the end" (p. 173). "The desire to do the will of God will be ever present in true believers" (p. 174). "Obedience is the inevitable manifestation of true faith" (p. 175). "Faith obeys, unbelief rebels. The fruit of one's life reveals whether that person is a believer or an unbeliever. There is no middle ground" (p. 178). "Salvation requires total transformation . . . it produces a changed life" (p. 183).

Does the New Testament teach that a believer will always have such a transformation in his behavior that it will be immediately observable? This can be a difficult question because the New Testament does teach that a believer in Jesus Christ is constitutionally changed (Rom. 6:1-14) and the *implication* is that this new life *should* begin to manifest itself, but does the New Testament teach that *every* new believer will *immediately* do that or if he doesn't he *wasn't saved*? The New Testament teaches that it is possible to be a secret disciple (Jn. 19:38). That at least demonstrates that it is possible for the life of a new believer to not be immediately observable. MacArthur has gone too far in claiming that salvation *always* produces an immediately observable transformed life.

Doesn't the New Testament demand that the believer will ultimately produce fruit? Can a person be a believer and not have any fruit at all? Obviously, if a person had *no* indication whatsoever of salvation, believers would have every right to wonder about that person's salvation, but this question is very difficult and highly subjective. There are verses that seem to indicate that a genuine believer may end up with little or no fruit (Jn 15:2, 2 Pet. 1:8-9, 1 Cor. 3 11-15). Besides, how much fruit is sufficient? The other side of this question is: can a genuine believer fall into sin? Can a believer be controlled by sin? The New Testament teaches that it is possible to be a carnal Christian (Rom. 7:14-24, 1 Cor. 3:1-4). The position on the result of regeneration taken in *The Gospel According to Jesus* renders the imperatives of the New Testament either redundant or useless. For example, Paul says "do not be conformed to this world" (Rom. 12:2). If MacArthur's view of salvation is correct, it is not possible for a believer to be conformed to the world. Why then did Paul warn against it? MacArthur's system of salvation has eliminated the possibility of a carnal Christian. He has gone too far!

Does the New Testament teach that all believers will endure to the end and does it also teach that if a professing believer falls away, he was never saved? Of course not! Isn't it possible for a believer to commit a sin unto death, that is die in sin (1 Jn. 5:16, 1

Cor. 11:30, Jas. 1:15, 5:19-20, Acts 5:1-11, etc.)? MacArthur has once again gone too far by insisting that if believers fall away they were never saved.

Here then are the questions, which need to be answered concerning the result of salvation. Is the change in the Christian *always* immediately observable by others? Is there not such a thing as a carnal believer? Isn't it possible for a Christian to commit a sin that is unto death? The New Testament seems to indicate that some believers do not begin well, some live carnal lives all their life and some don't end up too well. That's tragic, but true. When it happens we should be grieved and do everything we can to help those believers grow. I would personally begin by going over the truths of the gospel to make sure the individual is saved. Once I was satisfied he understood the gospel and gave a clear testimony of having trusted Christ, I would then urge that individual by the mercies of God to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ.

MacArthur's system of salvation misinterprets what the New Testament says about the requirement for salvation and the result of salvation. The New Testament does not teach lordship salvation. It teaches that God graciously saves sinners who are constitutionally changed at conversion and *should manifest the lordship of Christ in their lives*. Unfortunately not all immediately do and some fall into sin never to return. God then chastens them even to premature, physical death. Read 1 Corinthians!

MacARTHUR MISHANDLES THEOLOGY

To prevent being accused of teaching salvation by works, MacArthur repeatedly claims that God gives the repentance, the faith, the commitment and the obedience. Has not MacArthur used a legitimate teaching of Scripture—the working of God in salvation—to eliminate another teaching of the Word, namely, man's part in salvation? Does not the Scripture constantly admonish men to believe? MacArthur's system of salvation seems to mishandle this critical theological issue by insisting that God does it all. In MacArthur's system, God is a puppet-master. Theologically, MacArthur has gone too far. He has emphasized God's part in salvation to the virtual elimination of man's part.

MacARTHUR MISCONSTRUES CHURCH HISTORY

MacArthur claims that much of church history supports his view of the gospel according to Jesus, but he quotes mainly from the Puritans and mostly on one issue. Would all those he quoted accept his total system of salvation? Is not his system just historic Puritan Calvinism (compare the chapter on church history in this paper)?

MacARTHUR WILL MISLEAD MANY

This book will confuse believers and unbelievers alike concerning: 1) the condition of salvation and 2) the assurance of salvation, not to mention what it will do in causing some believers to judge other believers. (MacArthur's system of salvation will produce confusion and a judgmental attitude. Where MacArthur's book is accepted as true by a

church it will not produce a loving group of believers, but a judgmental group of "saints." At least that has often been the case where this kind of Calvinistic Puritanism has been preached.)

The Condition of Salvation. What must I do to be saved? MacArthur's system of salvation teaches that God does it. Well, if He does it, what must I do to get Him to do it? Apparently, you must feel sorry for sin, forsake it and submit to the absolute Lordship of Jesus Christ. How sorry must I be? How much turning must I do? How much obeying must I do? These questions are never answered. Any answer will by the nature of the case be subjective, which will cause people to be confused, especially perfectionistic-type people. MacArthur's emphasis will produce confusion concerning the condition of salvation.

Assurance of Salvation. What must I do to be sure that I am saved? MacArthur's system of salvation emphatically declares the *only* validation of salvation is a life of obedience. It is the only possible proof that a person really knows Jesus Christ. If one does not *obey* Christ as a pattern of life, then professing to know Him is an empty, verbal exercise" (p. 194). The author quotes approvingly Jonathan Edwards who said, "It is not God's design that men should attain assurance in any other way than by mortifying corruption, increasing in grace and obtaining the lively exercise of it" (p. 231). "The only possible proof?"

The Apostle John said, "This is the promise that He has promised us--eternal life (1 Jn. 2:25) . . . and this is the testimony that God has given us, eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life, he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. These things have I written unto you that believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life" (1 Jn. 5:11-13). The apostle John says we can have assurance by taking God at His Word, but away with what John, the apostle, said. If we follow John MacArthur, we must look at our life, not at the Word of God, our works, not the work of Christ. According to MacArthur's system, is it possible to have the assurance of salvation on the day a person trusts Christ? Of course not. You don't know whether or not you merely had an empty profession. You haven't had time enough yet for a "life of obedience." Then at what point can I be assured that I have salvation? John, not the apostle, never tells us that.

That's the problem. The "Gospel According to John" (MacArthur, Jr.) leaves us without assurance. Thank God that the gospel according to Jesus is not the gospel according to John (MacArthur, Jr.).

If lordship salvation is not the answer to easy believism and ungodly living among professing Christians, what is? THE ANSWER IS TO PREACH THE GOSPEL OF THE GRACE OF GOD AND TO TEACH BELIEVERS TO OBEY THE WORD OF GOD.

The biblical gospel is the blessed bulletin that the God-man, Jesus Christ, died to pay for all of our sins and bodily arose from the dead (1 Cor. 15:3-4). If anyone will simply acknowledge that he is a sinner and trust Jesus Christ--His death on the cross and resurrection from the dead--as his only hope of heaven, *plus nothing*, he can know the day he trusts Christ that he has eternal life! We have God's Word on it (1 Jn. 5:10-13).

What about the low level of spirituality among professing Christians today? There is no doubt that many churchgoers are unregenerate; therefore, first and foremost we must clearly preach the gospel of the grace of God, so that they can come to know Jesus Christ

(MacArthur's approach would have us telling these people to look at their life to see if they are saved. What these people need is to understand the gospel. We should point them to Christ and especially His death on the cross as the complete payment for their sin). Beyond that it is also true that there are Christians who are living ungodly lives. Unfortunately, that is not new. In ancient Corinth there were Christians who were getting drunk--in church--and even living in immorality. (Some even died because of their sin, cf. 1 Cor. 11:30!) Don't misunderstand, we must be concerned about the spirituality of believers, but the solution is not to remake the gospel. Rather, the Word of God must be preached so believers can grow in grace. Believers need to be taught that every child of God should live a godly life, because God has saved him by His grace, and God will reward him at the judgement seat of Christ if he does, or conversely, God will chasten him if he doesn't. Believers who live in open, overt sin need to be confronted with church discipline.

Easy believism and carnality are legitimate problems that need to be addressed, but the solution is not lordship salvation. It is the clear preaching of the gospel of the grace of God to sinners and the proper teaching of the Word of God to believers. God saves sinners by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone--freely--without cost to the one who will simply *trust*, that is, rely upon Jesus Christ for eternal life (Jn. 3:16). As the believer lives a life of faith and obedience, he will grow in the grace of God, be conformed to the image of Christ, be empowered by the Spirit of God, and be rewarded at the judgement seat of Christ. That's the message, which needs to be proclaimed, not easy believism or lordship salvation.

Easy believism goes too far in one direction and lordship salvation goes too far in the other. O, may God give the church a Biblical balance.