

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

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The Gospel According to John MacArthur

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The Gospel According to Jesus, John F. MacArthur, Jr. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, indexed, 253 pages, 1988. Forewords by James Montgomery Boice and J. I. Packer.

For the past few years "lordship salvation" has been a controversial issue. Watching the debate is painful, for neither side can get the story straight. It is like watching a debate between Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses about Christ, or between antinomians and Theonomists about the law of God.

One of the principal protagonists of the lordship salvation debate has been John MacArthur, pastor of Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, California, president of The Master's College and Seminary, and a nationally known radio preacher. "Men have always stumbled over the simplicity of salvation," MacArthur cries, rubbing his bruised knees.

MacArthur laments the "debacle in contemporary evangelism," but being semi-Arminian, and failing to understand and believe the Biblical doctrines of justification by faith alone and the imputed righteousness of Christ, he cannot understand the causes of the debacle, and he advocates a solution that will lead to an even worse situation. Rather than criticizing the pervasive Arminianism of today's evangelism, an Arminianism that perverts and subverts the Gospel of Jesus, MacArthur attacks justification by faith alone and suggests that works be understood as part of faith. Historically, an

emphasis on works has usually been the debate strategy of both the Roman church and Protestant Arminians. It was also the strategy of Paul's opponents.

The cover of MacArthur's book, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, includes praise from *The Fundamentalist Journal*, *Alliance Life*, *The Standard*, James Montgomery Boice, David Hocking, and J. I. Packer. In his Foreword, Packer astonishingly asserts that "lordship salvation" is "the mainstream Protestant consensus on the nature of justifying faith" and attacks the Biblical view that faith is "bare assent to the truth about Jesus' saving role." Assent to Jesus' saving role, says Packer, "is less than faith and less than saving." Packer thinks MacArthur's book is "fine, clear, cogent, and edifying." "What is in question," he writes, "is the nature of faith."

Dispensationalism

John MacArthur is himself a dispensationalist: "Dispensationalism is a fundamentally correct system of understanding God's program through the ages.... I consider myself a traditional premillennial dispensationalist" (25). This leads him into saying that Christ's Earthly reign was "postponed" because of the unbelief of the Jews: "When the Israelites rejected their Messiah's rule, they forfeited that permanent earthly dimension of the kingdom not only for their generation but for generations to

follow. The earthly reign of Christ was postponed until a time yet future...."(118).

One stands amazed at such a statement. It implies that had the Jews accepted Christ, the crucifixion would not have been necessary and Christ would have begun his political reign at once. What actually happened--the crucifixion, resurrection, and the Gentile church -- are all part of Plan B. Even the second coming of Christ becomes problematic in this view, for he would already be reigning on Earth.

But, as Packer's Foreword suggests, the crucial matter in this book is not dispensational theology, but the definitions of both *faith* and *Gospel*. And on these questions, both MacArthur and his defenders seem fatally confused. MacArthur confuses at least five questions in his discussion:

1. What is faith?
2. What is the Gospel?
3. How is a sinner justified?
4. How does one know one is saved?
5. How does one know another is saved?

The Definition of Faith

MacArthur does not define *faith* until chapter 16 (of 20), and when he does, he gives a non-Biblical definition. He quotes W. E. Vine with approval: Faith consists of "a firm conviction...a personal surrender...[and] conduct inspired by such surrender" (173-174). According to this definition, faith includes conduct, that is, works. Faith is conviction, surrender, and conduct. Whether MacArthur or Vine realize it or not, they have fallen back into the Romanist heresy, and MacArthur has deceived many with his book, including at least two who ought to have known better, James Montgomery Boice and J. I. Packer.

MacArthur begins on a promising note:

"Let me say as clearly as possible right now that salvation is by God's sovereign grace and grace alone. Nothing a lost, degenerate, spiritually dead

sinner can do will in any way contribute to salvation. Saving faith, repentance, commitment, and obedience are all divine works, wrought by the Holy Spirit in the heart of everyone who is saved. I have never taught that some pre-salvation works of righteousness are necessary to or part of salvation" (xiii).

The reader should keep in mind that the Roman Church also does not teach that *pre-salvation* works of righteousness are necessary to or part of salvation. Canon I of the decrees of the Council of Trent says: "If any one saith, that man may be justified before God by his own works, whether done through the teaching of human nature, or that of the law, without the grace of God through Jesus Christ: let him be anathema."

Nor did the Judaizers teach that *pre-salvation* works of righteousness are necessary to or part of salvation. Paul damned the Judaizers for teaching that *post-salvation* works of righteousness are necessary for entrance into Heaven. The contention of both the Roman Church and the Judaizers is that one cannot be saved without *post-salvation*, that is post-regeneration, works of righteousness. The Judaizers taught that one must be circumcised and obey other parts of the Mosaic law; the Roman Church teaches both the necessity and meritoriousness of good works of Christians for salvation. In short, MacArthur's "clarification" still leaves him among the non-Christians.

By contrast, Biblical teaching, is, in the words of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*:

"Those whom God effectually calls he also freely justifies, *not by infusing righteousness into them*, but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous; *not for anything wrought in them, or done by them*, but for Christ's sake alone; not by imputing faith itself, that act of believing, *or any other evangelical obedience*, to them as their righteousness; but by imputing the obedience and satisfaction of Christ unto them.... *Faith...is the alone instrument of justification....*"

The Biblical teaching and the Protestant position is that neither pre- nor post-regeneration works are either meritorious or necessary for justification. It is the only imputation of Christ's righteousness by faith that makes a sinner acceptable to God.

MacArthur rejects the Biblical view of justification and adopts the Roman Catholic view: "Many people believe justified means 'just-as-if-I'd-never-sinned.' In other words, God says, 'I count you righteous even though you're really not.' It is true that God makes that declaration, but there is also a reality of righteousness. We are not only declared righteous; we are made *righteous*" (*Justification by Faith*, 1988, 98). This making righteous is accomplished by infusing Christ's righteousness into Christians: "God actually credits righteousness to our account. He imputes righteousness to us; he infuses divine life into us. He regenerates and sanctifies us. He makes the unholy holy, and therefore declares that we are righteous.... There is a reality--God *gives us righteousness, and thus he can declare that we are righteous*" (*Justification*, 121). MacArthur writes: "The believing sinner is justified by righteousness infused into him" (*Justification*, 122).

MacArthur confuses justification, regeneration, and sanctification:

"The word *justification* is a technical term that refers to our legal standing before God: We have been declared to be just because of our faith. [This is *not* the Biblical or Protestant view.] But the word [justification] also embraces a radical and real transformation. Our moral character has been altered eternally through regeneration. Justification by faith means that God has both declared us righteous and made us righteous. We have been regenerated – made new by faith.... Justification is not only a state of being righteous; it is actual regeneration. We are made righteous by faith" (*Justification*, 132).

This, of course, is the official teaching of the Roman Church. Canon XI of the Council of Trent states: "If any one saith, that men are justified,

either by the sole imputation of the justice of Christ, or by the sole remission of sins, to the exclusion of the grace and the charity which is poured forth in their hearts by the Holy Ghost, and is inherent in them; or even that the grace whereby we are justified is only the favor of God: let him be anathema." Canon XII states: "If any one saith, that justifying faith is nothing else but confidence in the divine mercy which remits sins for Christ's sake; or, that this confidence alone is that whereby we are justified: Let him be anathema."

MacArthur's view of justification is Rome's; it is opposed to the Protestant position as expressed by the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. That *Confession* quite clearly teaches that sinners are justified "not by infusing righteousness into them...[nor] for anything wrought in them"; that is, the *Confession* rejects MacArthur's view.

It is also the Protestant and Biblical position that sanctification, which MacArthur confuses with justification, does not consist of good works, but is the progressive moral cleansing accomplished by God through his truth: "Sanctify them by your Truth. Your Word is Truth." Sanctification, no less than justification and regeneration, is an act of God. Whatever good works we do are predestined by God and are the *result* of our justification and sanctification, not the cause. We do not become good by practicing good deeds, as Aristotle taught; we do some good deeds because we have been declared legally righteous in justification and made partially good in sanctification. We work out, only because God has already justified and sanctified us.

What Is the Gospel?

MacArthur begins his Introduction by asking that question. Unfortunately he does not answer it promptly. Instead, he launches an attack on "cheap grace" and "easy believism." These phrases confuse him. The Biblical teaching is that grace is not only cheap, it is completely free; otherwise it would not be grace. The Bible also teaches that believing the Gospel is not easy; in fact, it is completely impossible for the natural man, and that unless faith – belief – is received as a gift of God, believing the Gospel cannot be done at all.

The trouble with modern preaching is not, as MacArthur alleges, that men are taught they must believe certain facts in order to be saved – for that is exactly what the Bible says – the trouble with today's evangelism is that modern preachers tell men: (1) that information, facts, and truth don't matter; or (2) that they are able to believe the saving truth on their own power. The preachers garble the facts to be believed or teach that facts are unimportant, that one need only be sincere, or active in good works.

The fundamental errors of modern evangelists are: (1) They teach neither the total depravity of man nor the sovereignty of God, but free will; (2) they do not teach God's unconditional election of some to salvation and others to damnation – instead they preach a weak and stupid god who waits to see who will believe and who will not believe; (3) they do not teach that Christ died only for his people and saves only his people – instead they teach that Christ died for all men and offers salvation freely and sincerely to all; (4) they do not teach the omnipotence of the Holy Spirit, but tell men that they can exercise faith or not, as they will; and (5) they do not teach the perseverance of believers – instead they tell men that they can be saved at breakfast and lost at lunch, or, alternatively, that they can believe once for a moment, but perhaps never again, and nevertheless end up in Heaven. Modern evangelists do not know and do not preach the Gospel. Neither does John MacArthur, judging from this book.

Rather than discussing the Gospel, MacArthur discusses psychology. He attacks "intellectual assent." Modern men, he says, "have been told that the only criterion for salvation is knowing and believing some basic facts about Christ"(17). Of course it is not only modern men who are thus informed; that was the message of the apostles as well: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved." MacArthur intends to extirpate the view that justification is by faith -- belief – alone. Of course, he keeps the form of the words, but he redefines "faith" to include works.

On page 67 he writes:

"Those who argue against lordship salvation have a tendency to view faith as merely [notice the language of propaganda] intellectual assent to a set of Biblical facts. To them the gospel is ultimately an academic [notice the propaganda] issue, a list of basic historical and doctrinal data about Christ's death, burial, and resurrection [such as Paul gives in *1 Corinthians* 15?]. Believing those facts constitutes saving faith."

MacArthur believes that believing facts cannot be saving faith. In a note he asks: "Is that not demonic faith (*James* 2:19), orthodox but not efficacious?" MacArthur here teaches that one can have orthodox faith and not be saved. He says it is not enough to believe the truth. MacArthur wants something more. So does the Roman Church. So does the natural man. Men have always stumbled over the simplicity of salvation.

MacArthur says that the demons are orthodox believers. What better refutation of both justification by faith alone and orthodoxy could there be than orthodox, believing demons? In a note on page 23 he writes: "Even the demons have faith enough to grasp the basic facts (v.19), but that is not redeeming faith. 'Faith without works is useless' (v.20), and 'Faith without works is dead' (v.26)." One can only conclude from this that what makes faith saving, in MacArthur's view, is works. Belief alone is not enough. Even the demons believe. Even the demons are orthodox. Works are necessary for saving faith; works are necessary for justification.

Anyone who agrees with MacArthur's interpretation of James must say the same thing: The thing that makes faith saving faith is works. And that is pure Romanism – and pure humanism. The conclusion is logically inexorable; if the reader does not like the conclusion, he should re-read James and figure out where he has misunderstood what James says.

On page 32 MacArthur writes: "Salvation is a gift, but it is appropriated only through a faith that goes beyond merely [propaganda again] understanding and assenting to the truth. Demons have that kind of

faith." Obviously then, understanding and assenting to the truth are not saving faith. "No one," thunders MacArthur, "is saved simply by knowing and believing facts.... The object of saving faith is not a creed; it is Christ Himself" (68). On page 112 he asserts that "The object of saving faith is not a creed, not a church, not a pastor, not a set of rituals or ceremonies. Jesus is the object of saving faith." To which the appropriate reply is, "Which Jesus?"

Anyone who cares to read documents from the fundamentalist-modernist controversy at the beginning of the twentieth century, such as *Christianity And Liberalism* by J. Gresham Machen, will discover that MacArthur is here taking the modernist position; The liberals also declared that creeds are not the object of faith, that Christ is the object. It was the fundamentalists, the Bible believers, who insisted on creeds. The reason is quite simple: The only way to identify the Christ in whom we are to believe is to describe him, and that description is a creed. The Gospel itself is a creed. If we do not believe the creed, we do not believe Christ. And if we profess to believe in Christ but do not believe true statements about him – a creed -- we are liars. Christ identified himself with his words. The words and the Word are identical. The fighting fundamentalists at the early part of the century were more orthodox than today's fundamentalists, for they did not teach, "No creed but Christ," as MacArthur does.

The Bible is very clear about faith:

"They believed the Scripture." *John 2:22*.

"The man believed the word that Jesus had spoken to him." *John 4:50*.

"These things are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God." *John 20:31*.

"Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in his sight. For by the law is the knowledge of sin, but now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God which is through faith in Christ Jesus to all and on all who believe, for there is no difference. For all

have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.... Therefore, we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law.... Blessed is the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works." *Romans 4*.

If a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law, conduct – works – cannot be part of faith. MacArthur has offered an un-Scriptural definition of faith. In his commentary on *John 3:33*, John Calvin wrote: "To believe the Gospel is nothing else than to assent to the truths that God has revealed." The sort faith that MacArthur rejects is what the Bible requires.

In keeping with his view of faith, MacArthur denigrates "facts," "doctrine," "intellectual assent," and so on. On page 70 he refers to the relationship between sin and suffering as "theological trivia." In a logical fallacy, he says the Pharisees were "fat with theological information" (71). So if we today emphasize knowledge, we are likely to be Pharisees. MacArthur should read the Bible more closely, beginning with a concordance and looking up words such as *knowledge, understanding, truth, mind*, and so forth. He will find hundreds of entries. He will learn from Peter that we have received everything we need for life and godliness through knowledge. He will learn from John that we are sanctified by truth. He will discover – from James no less! – that God regenerates us by the word of truth.

Three Odd Examples

MacArthur offers three examples – the rich young ruler, Judas, and those condemned by Christ at the last judgment – in support of his argument that works are a part of faith. The fact that he does so indicates that he completely misunderstands those portions of Scripture.

MacArthur says of the rich young ruler: "No matter what he believed, since he was unwilling to forsake all, he could not be a disciple of Christ" (78). But the story of the rich young ruler, at the very least, means the opposite: Good works are useless without belief.

The young man claimed to have kept the law from his youth up, and Christ did not contradict him. But the young man simply did not believe that Christ is God, or he would have sold his possessions and followed Christ. "Christ," says MacArthur falsely, "gave a message of works. In fact, Christ did not even mention faith or the facts of redemption. Nor did he challenge the man to believe"(79). The Gospel of Jesus, according to MacArthur, is a "message of works."

It apparently did not occur to MacArthur that the rich young ruler led exactly the sort of converted life -- a life of good works and obedience to the law -- that MacArthur says is saving faith, and yet the ruler was lost. There was no "easy believism," no "cheap grace" here. This rich young ruler had behaved in an exemplary fashion from his youth up, and he was lost. What he lacked, and MacArthur misses the point entirely, was faith. He did not believe that Christ was God (that was the whole point of Christ's question and statement: "Why do you call me good? Only God is good"), and therefore he would not sell his goods and follow Christ. What the rich young ruler lacked was not good works, but faith. It is disturbing to see how many pages MacArthur spends discussing the rich young ruler, and how he misses the point of the narrative entirely.

MacArthur is quite correct in criticizing those evangelists who tell people to "invite Jesus into their hearts," or "accept him as personal savior," or to "try Jesus," for those commands are neither the language nor the ideas of the Gospel. But when in the same sentence he condemns those evangelists who tell people to "believe the facts of the Gospel," he has rejected Christianity along with some of the counterfeit gospels of the twentieth century.

Judas

MacArthur asserts that Christ loved Judas (100). Why, then, was Judas lost? In saying that Jesus loved Judas, MacArthur shows that he does not understand one of the elementary facts of the Gospel, that Christ died only for his people. MacArthur's Gospel is not Jesus' Gospel.

Judas is another odd example for MacArthur to bring up, for he says that Judas "likely believed that Jesus was the Messiah" (he cites no evidence for this assertion); and he points out that Judas "had left everything to follow the Lord" (99). Hold everything. Isn't this—leaving everything to follow the Lord -- exactly what MacArthur has been telling us that we must do? Isn't this—leaving everything to follow the Lord -- the essence of "lordship salvation"? MacArthur has completely defeated his own argument by citing Judas' discipleship. He does not seem to understand that the example of Judas teaches that one may be discipled – a church-goer, a miracle worker, an evangelist, doer of good deeds – and yet be an unbeliever and go to Hell. What was missing in Judas' life was saving faith. That was the only reason he went to Hell. Judas was not a victim of "easy believism" or "cheap grace": MacArthur himself tells us that Judas had left all to follow Christ. Now Judas certainly believed something – perhaps he believed that Christ was his ticket to political power, we are not told -- but he did not believe *1 Corinthians* 15. Judas did not believe the facts of the Gospel, the facts that MacArthur continually disparages and denigrates, and that is why he went to Hell.

MacArthur's conclusion of his discussion of Judas indicates how little he understands: After writing, "For three years, day in and day out, he [Judas] occupied himself with Jesus Christ. He saw the Lord's miracles, heard his words, even participated in his ministry [the Bible implies that Judas performed miracles]...", MacArthur concludes, "Judas and his life of treachery stand as a solemn warning to those who casually [!] profess faith in Christ." But MacArthur has already told us that Judas was no casual professor. Until the end, to all merely human observers, Judas led the sort of life that MacArthur says distinguishes a true believer from a false believer. Yet at no time did Judas believe the truth of the Gospel. The example of Judas disproves MacArthur's point about the importance of conduct and the unimportance of knowing and believing facts.

Judas, MacArthur says, "had responded positively to Christ, but never with all his heart." Let me be quite clear at this point: No one, in this life, trusts

Christ with all his heart. We are all sinners so long as we live. The heart is desperately wicked and deceitful above all things. Who can know it? All our works and all our thoughts are tainted with sin. MacArthur's assertion that anything less than "total commitment" (103), cannot be saving faith, is simply false. If we have faith as a grain of mustard seed, we are justified. If we have doubt mixed with our faith, God will help our unbelief. What God will not honor is having the wrong object of faith. Judas did not go to Hell because of a lack of "total commitment" to Christ, but because he did not believe the right propositions about Christ.

In his stress on "total commitment," MacArthur has strayed into the heresy of perfectionism. He is led there because he thinks Judas had some faith in Christ; Judas just wasn't "totally committed." On page 105, MacArthur talks about Christians' having an "ever-growing commitment to the Savior." He does not explain how a total commitment, which he declares to be the *sine qua non* of saving faith, can be "ever-growing."

The Damned Orthodox

The third odd example that MacArthur cites as supporting "lordship salvation" is the last judgment as described by Christ in *Matthew 7*. MacArthur argues, "It is not the one who says he knows Jesus or who believes certain facts about him. It is the one who *does* the Father's will" who is saved. MacArthur is suggesting that one is saved by works, not by profession, and not by faith.

He continues: "These people even say, 'Lord, Lord,' revealing their basic orthodoxy." MacArthur does not miss an opportunity to ridicule, belittle, and disparage orthodoxy. Here he very clearly suggests that those who are damned are basically orthodox.

Once again, however, MacArthur has missed the point. What the address, "Lord, Lord," reveals, it would seem obvious, is that these people were practitioners of lordship salvation. MacArthur writes: "They know about Jesus' lordship, and they even give verbal assent to it, but they do not submit to him as Lord...." MacArthur does not explain

what that missing "submission" is. He strangely continues, not quite understanding his own words: "They [the damned] are fervent, pious, and respectful.... They have been busy doing things in the Lord's name...." Then he concludes, "Real faith is as concerned with *doing* the will of God as it is with affirming the facts of true doctrine."

Two points must be made here: These people were in fact *doing things* – performing miracles, prophesying, casting out demons -- and doing all these things in the name of the Lord Jesus. If he had known these people, MacArthur would have found it impossible to criticize them for not believing in lordship salvation. Their defense at the Last Judgment is their own works.

But the things that they do – miracles, prophecies, and casting out demons, all in Jesus' name – are obviously not the will of the Father, for Christ says that they have *not* done the will of the Father, but have done iniquity. Therefore, "doing the Father's will" must mean something other than good works. Calvin suggests what it is: "To do the will of the Father...means...to believe in Christ, according to that saying, 'This is the will of him that sent me, that everyone who sees the Son, and believes on him, may have everlasting life....'" In his commentary on these verses, the great Baptist theologian John Gill, from whom the Baptist John MacArthur could learn much, says:

"It may be observed that these men lay the whole stress of their salvation upon what they have done in Christ's name; and not on Christ himself, in whom there is salvation, and in no other; they say not a syllable of what Christ has done and suffered, but only of what they have done. Indeed, the things they instance are the greatest done among men; the gifts they had were the most excellent, excepting the grace of God; the works they did were of an extraordinary nature; thence it follows that there can be no salvation, nor is it to be expect from men's works."

These men will be condemned at the Last Judgment because of their unbelief, because of their lack of

orthodoxy, contrary to what MacArthur writes. Their defense on the Day of Judgment will not be the facts of *1 Corinthians 15* -- the Gospel of Jesus Christ -- but the "wonderful works" they have done in the name of the Lord Jesus. Judas himself could truthfully argue in that day that he had prophesied, performed miracles, and cast out demons. But he could not plead the blood of Christ on his behalf, for he did not believe the facts of *1 Corinthians 15*, which MacArthur continually belittles. MacArthur has missed the point of Christ's warning about the last judgment entirely.

There is still another point that must be made. MacArthur writes: "Real faith is as concerned with doing the will of God as it is with affirming the facts of true doctrine." Now of course "concerned with" is an ambiguous phrase, and in one sense, faith is "concerned with" works. Faith stands to works as cause to effect: A man who believes the Gospel will tend to do the truth, and after his death and glorification will do nothing but the truth. But that is not MacArthur's meaning. I have already cited his view that works are *part* of faith -- not a *consequence* of faith, but a part of faith. His view is destructive of Christianity, for it not only blurs the distinction between imputation and infusion, but the distinction between justification by faith and justification by works as well. So we must deny MacArthur's statement that real faith is as concerned with doing as it is with believing. Real faith is believing, period. It is not doing. It is assenting to known truths. MacArthur's notion of faith overthrows the Gospel of Jesus Christ and turns it into a faith plus works religion -- he says that Christ preached a "message of works."

On page 190 MacArthur attacks Zane Hodges' assertion that "the assurance of the believer rests squarely on the direct promises [of God] in which this offer [of salvation] is made, and on nothing else. It follows from this [says MacArthur] that the assertion that a believer must find his assurance in his works is a grave and fundamental theological error." MacArthur wants us to base our assurance on our works. But is that not the error of those condemned to Hell in Matthew 7:21? They did not look to the promise of salvation, they did not appeal to the facts of *1 Corinthians 15*, and they appealed

to their works for their assurance of salvation. And they were very assured. The record suggests that they were dumbfounded when Christ commanded them to depart to everlasting punishment.

Furthermore, if one is candid, he can never be assured by looking at his works, for they are filthy rags. We are all unprofitable servants. Luther realized this, and the Reformation was born. Jesus Christ alone is our righteousness, and the believer's assurance of salvation comes from Christ's righteousness alone and the promise of God, not from the believer's works. Again, the *Westminster Confession* states the Biblical position on assurance: The assurance of faith is "founded upon the divine truth of the promises of salvation, the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made, the testimony of the Spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God...." Furthermore, says the *Confession*, the "duties of obedience" are not the ground of our assurance, but "the proper fruits of assurance." MacArthur gets the relationship between works and assurance backward, just as he gets the relationship between faith and works backward. Whatever good works Christians do, they do because they are already assured, not in order to be assured.

Anti-Evangelism

On page 74 MacArthur writes: "Teaching theology to a heathen will not bring him to faith in Christ. He may learn the evangelical vocabulary and verbally affirm the truth. He may accept the truth of a list of gospel facts." This statement, like so many others in MacArthur's book, is very confused. It is true that memorizing Bible verses will not make one a Christian, any more than memorizing the ten planks of *The Communist Manifesto* will make one a Communist. Nor will "verbally affirming the truth" make one a Christian. It is not a *profession* of faith, which may indeed be insincere, but a *confession* of faith, which by definition is sincere, that indicates one is a Christian. But if a person "accepts the truth of a list of Gospel facts," he is already a Christian, for the natural man cannot accept the truth of the Gospel. MacArthur apparently believes that the natural man can accept the Gospel facts as true. That is precisely what the Bible denies. MacArthur

tells us that there can be heathen believers. The Bible tells us that he who believes has passed already from death to life.

Heart and Mind

Behind MacArthur's failure to understand either faith or the Gospel lies his acceptance of the heart-mind dichotomy: Repentance "is much more than a mere [notice the language of propaganda again] change of mind -- it involves a complete change of heart attitude, interest, and direction" (32). If MacArthur had understood that the Bible teaches the heart and the mind are the same thing, he would have written a different book. It is disappointing to read books by theologians who do not know even the elementary things of the Bible and who prefer to take their psychology from Hollywood.

On page 108 MacArthur confuses himself further: He denigrates human wisdom and human reason. He says that "human intellect cannot understand or receive spiritual truth." But of course Christ is human, as are the apostles, and John MacArthur; if human intellect cannot understand or receive spiritual truth, then neither Christ nor the apostles nor John MacArthur can believe and understand the Gospel. What MacArthur should have written was "sinful man," or the "natural man." The same mistake appears in the aphorism: "To err is human; to forgive, divine." The truth is, "To err is sinful; to forgive, righteous." Sin and error are not metaphysical problems, but ethical problems.

Conclusion

MacArthur's book is very confused and dangerous. It does not present the Gospel according to Jesus, but another gospel, which is not a gospel at all, similar to that of the Roman Church. The problem with today's evangelism, which is the problem that MacArthur set out to solve but exacerbated instead, is that the Gospel is not being preached in the churches, and few people, including John MacArthur, seem to know what it is. Paul outlines the Gospel according to Jesus very carefully in *I Corinthians* 15. Here are the facts, the Gospel, that MacArthur disdains so much:

1. **Christ died.**

Implication 1.1: Christ was (and is) a God-man who could die.

Implication 1.2: Christ did not swoon or faint or merely appear to die.

Implication 1.3: Christ laid down his life; he was not killed against his will.

2. **Christ died for our sins.**

Implication 2.1: Christ died for a purpose, not by accident.

Implication 2.2: We are sinners deserving death.

Implication 2.3: Christ did not die for his own sins.

Implication 2.4: Christ had no sins.

Implication 2.5: Christ died in our place; he bore the punishment we deserve.

Implication 2.6: Christ was an acceptable substitute for us.

Implication 2.7: We are free from the punishment we deserve.

Implication 2.8: Christ did not die for the sins of every man, but only for our sins.

3. **Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.**

Implication 3.1: Christ is the Messiah prophesied by the Old Testament.

Implication 3.2: Christ's death was neither an accident nor Plan B,

but part of the one eternal plan of God for the salvation of his people.

Implication 3.3 Christ fulfilled the prophecies of the Old Testament.

4. **Christ was buried and rose again the third day.**

Implication 4.1: Christ's burial and resurrection are historical events.

Implication 4.2: Christ is not dead, but living.

Implication 4.3: Death has been conquered and has lost its power over

Christ and his people.

5. Christ was buried and rose again the third day according to the Scriptures.

Implication 5.1: Christ's death, burial, and resurrection were prophesied by the Old Testament.

Implication 5.2: Christ's death and resurrection were parts of God's eternal plan.

This is Paul's outline of the Gospel. The phrase "according to the Scriptures" implies other ideas not explicitly mentioned in the outline. Modern evangelists deny many parts of the Gospel: Some say we are not sinners; we have free will. Some say there is no eternal, unchangeable plan of God; that God is not sovereign. Some say that Christ died for all men without exception. And some deny that salvation is by grace through faith alone. But Paul wrote: "Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the Gospel which I preached to you, which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you."

That is the Gospel according to Jesus. Anything else is something else.

Faith Works

Faith Works: The Gospel According to the Apostles. John F. MacArthur, Jr. Dallas: Word Publishing, 1993, 272 pages, glossary, indexes.

Faith Works is the sequel to MacArthur's best seller, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, which we reviewed in two previous issues of *The Trinity Review*. He addresses this book to those who asked for more information after they had read *The Gospel According to Jesus*. MacArthur believes that "the gospel according to Jesus is also the gospel

according to the apostles" (11). There is no difference between the two. There are, however, some differences between *Faith Works* and *The Gospel According to Jesus*.

Faith Works is a more systematic approach to the issues of faith, justification, works, and sanctification. It has chapters on faith, grace, repentance, justification, righteousness, sin, dead faith, assurance, perseverance of the saints, and what must one do to be saved; plus three appendixes comparing three views of Lordship salvation, dispensationalism, and quotations from earlier theologians.

However, there are no retractions of errors in this book. Some errors that appeared in *The Gospel According to Jesus* are repeated, and some statements are changed without any indication to the reader that MacArthur has changed his mind. An example of the latter is this: In *The Gospel According to Jesus*, MacArthur had denounced belief in a creed: "The object of saving faith is not a creed; it is Christ Himself" (68, 112, emphasis added). But in *Faith Works* he writes: "The object of faith is Christ Himself, *not only* a creed or a promise" (24, emphasis added). In this second statement MacArthur makes room for the view that he had denounced in *The Gospel According to Jesus*: Faith is belief in a creed. His earlier view was "no creed but Christ." His most recent view is "Christ plus creed." Unfortunately, MacArthur still has an inaccurate view of the relationship between persons and propositions, but at least he has moved away from the modernist position of denouncing creeds. *But the unfortunate fact remains: MacArthur does not retract the false statements in The Gospel According to Jesus: He simply makes contradictory statements in Faith Works.* So the best we can say is that MacArthur has contradicted himself.

Another instance of MacArthur's changing his mind from one book to the second appears on pages 29 and 30: "No true Christian would ever suggest that works need to be added to faith in order to secure salvation." But that is precisely what MacArthur himself suggested in *The Gospel According to Jesus* when he made works a part of faith, interpreted

James to say that works are necessary for justification, and asserted that the rich young ruler was lost "no matter what he believed," because he had not done the proper works.

Faith

MacArthur also reiterates some of his earlier errors: For example,

The lordship controversy is a disagreement over the nature of true faith. Those who want to eliminate Christ's lordship from the gospel see faith as simple trust in a set of truths about Christ. Faith as they describe it is merely a personal appropriation of the promise of eternal life. Scripture describes faith as more than that – it is a wholehearted trust in Christ personally (e.g., *Gal*: 2:16; *Phil*. 3:9). Not merely faith *about him*, faith *in Him*. Note the difference: If I say I believe some promise you have made, I am saying far less than if I say I trust you. Believing in a person necessarily involves some degree of commitment. Trusting Christ means placing oneself in his custody for both life and death. It means we rely on his counsel, trust in His goodness, and entrust ourselves for time and eternity to His guardianship. Real faith, saving faith, is all of me (mind, emotions, and will), embracing all of him...(30).

Several comments on this paragraph are in order. First, the verses MacArthur cites say absolutely nothing about faith *in* Christ versus faith *about* him. Instead, they contrast faith and works. The Bible knows nothing of a distinction between faith *in* Christ versus faith *about* him. The only Biblical contrast -- in the very verses MacArthur cites -- is between faith and works. Apparently MacArthur has been confused by the prepositions. If I have faith *in* Christ, I assent to true statements -- the Gospel -- about him. If I assent to true statements -- the Gospel -- *about* him, I have faith *in* him. If I trust a bank, I assent to certain statements *about* the bank. Two different prepositions do not indicate two different sorts of faith.

Second, contrary to what MacArthur writes, if I say I believe some promise you have made, I am indeed saying I trust you. If you promise to give me a job and I believe your promise, I do in fact trust you. The contrast here is not between persons and propositions or promises, as MacArthur wishes to maintain, but between different propositions. If I believe the Gospel, I believe that Christ is indeed Lord, for that is part of the Gospel: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved." That means, among other things, that Christ is trustworthy in all that he says and does. By believing the Gospel I am trusting *in* Christ. The acts are identical. There are not two acts -- believing and trusting -- involved in faith, only one.

When we talk about sinful men who are not trustworthy, then we can assent to one statement they make while disagreeing with another. Furthermore, we have no guarantee that their future statements will be true. With Christ, who is not sinful and who is not a mere man, we know that all his statements, past and future, are true. But there is no difference in the nature of faith, only in the propositions believed. The psychological acts of believing in both cases are identical, and the objects of faith are always propositions. With the Lord Christ we assent to his complete truthfulness; with sinful men, we do not.

Finally, by listing mind, emotions, and will, MacArthur stumbles into a naive sort of faculty psychology. The Bible, in contrast, treats man as an indivisible unit: The mind or heart -- the terms are synonymous -- thinks, wills, and emotes.

In his chapter on faith, MacArthur attempts, unsuccessfully, to show that "*Hebrews* 11:1 faith is not like the everyday faith that we speak of" (42). His subsequent argument shows that many things we trust -- our senses, the water in our faucet, other people -- may in fact be untrustworthy. Here MacArthur is quite correct. The objects of faith may indeed be untrustworthy. But that does not mean that there are two kinds of faith; it merely means that there are trustworthy and untrustworthy objects of faith. Faith -- the act of believing -- is identical in all cases. The objects of faith -- the things believed -- are not.

A great deal of time and energy has been wasted for centuries by theologians trying to distinguish between various types of faith. They erred in thinking that what makes some faith saving and some faith not saving is a difference in the act of believing. They still had not freed themselves from the soteriological subjectivism of Roman Catholicism. They still had not understood the soteriological objectivism of the Gospel. There is nothing in the faith – the act of believing – itself that saves us. The only difference between saving belief and non-saving belief is the propositions believed – the object of faith. Saving faith is not saving because of some subjective difference in us or in our faith. Saving faith is saving only because of its object. The difference between saving and non-saving faith is objective, not subjective.

MacArthur presents a garbled analysis of faith as composed of three parts: *notitia*, *assensus*, and *fiducia*. These, he says, correspond to the intellectual, emotional, and volitional elements in real faith, respectively. Usually the three elements are described as knowledge, assent, and trust, and, if anything, trust is the emotional element, not *assensus*. But MacArthur disagrees. MacArthur then informs us that "The mind embraces *knowledge*...the heart gives *assent*...the will responds with *trust*" (44). So once again we have the un-Biblical head/heart distinction, and the heart, according to MacArthur, does the emoting.

What comes next is predictable: an attack on faith and justification: "It is not enough just to believe that the God of the Bible exists. [This is quite true, but the "just" belongs immediately before "that."] It is not enough to know [quite true] about His promises or even intellectually believe [quite false] the truth of the gospel" (47). In these sentences MacArthur says that belief in one God is not enough, and knowledge is not enough, both of which statements are true. But then he denies the Gospel when he says that even belief of the Gospel is inadequate.

Further, he declares, "No-lordship doctrine inevitably makes the gospel *message* the object of faith rather than the Lord Jesus Himself" (50). Once again, MacArthur has slipped back into his old

mode of thinking: persons *versus* propositions. The Bible knows nothing of such a dichotomy. Christ identified himself with his words: "I am the Truth." "I am the Life." "The words that I speak to you are Truth and Life." "He who keeps my Word shall not see death ever." Gordon Clark has an extended discussion of the relationship between the Word and the words in his book, *The Johannine Logos*, MacArthur seems not to have read it.

On the same page MacArthur announces a new view, but he does not correct his old: "When we say that faith encompasses obedience, we are speaking of the God-given attitude of obedience, not trying to make works a part of the definition of faith." But in *The Gospel According to Jesus*, making works a part of the definition of faith is exactly what MacArthur did.

Grace and Repentance

In his chapter on grace, MacArthur quotes Dietrich Bonhoeffer's "diatribe" (MacArthur's word) against cheap grace in which he attacks intellectual assent. Bonhoeffer was no fundamentalist; in fact he was quite liberal.

MacArthur declares that "the predominate [sic] no-lordship view on repentance is simply to redefine repentance as a change of mind – not a turning from sin or a change of purpose" (76). But this definition of *repentance* – a change of mind – is not a "redefinition," but the correct definition. *Metanoia* means a change of mind.

As for distinguishing a change of mind from a change of purpose or a turning from sin, once again MacArthur is attempting to separate things that cannot be separated. To believe the Gospel is to believe that "Christ died for our sins." It involves a change of mind about both Christ and ourselves. The two cannot be separated, for they are part of one proposition. We are not saved by believing the proposition "Christ died." We are saved by the Gospel, which includes the proposition, "Christ died for our sins." The act of faith *is* the act of repentance. The fact that the Gospel of John does not use the word "repent" but does use the word "believe" – a fact which Zane Hodges has made

much of -- does not imply that repentance is not necessary; it simply means that repentance and belief are the same thing. If theologians would pay attention to the Bible rather than repeating the errors of other theologians, controversies like this might be avoided.

Justification

In his chapter on justification, MacArthur begins by quoting R. C. Sproul (87): "The difference between Rome and the Reformation can be seen in these simple formulas:

Roman view

Faith + works = justification

Protestant view

Faith = justification + works."

Not only does this second equation contradict MacArthur's earlier statements about not making works a part of faith, it also contradicts the Biblical and Reformed doctrine of justification through faith alone. One wonders if MacArthur quotes Sproul correctly. If so, one wonders what R. C. Sproul was thinking when he wrote this false equation. But the most interesting thing is not MacArthur's quotation of some erroneous statement about justification, but his apparently unwitting endorsement of Cardinal Newman's view of justification.

John Henry Newman, a convert to Romanism from the Church of England in the nineteenth century, a man whom the Roman Catholic historian Lord Acton loathed for good reason, invented a subtle version of the Roman Catholic doctrine that in justification God makes the sinner righteous. Newman developed his theory in an attempt to develop a comprehensive theory of justification. He obliterated the differences between the Roman and Reformed views of justification. Newman believed that God's declaration of the sinner's innocence is creative, just like the creative decrees in Genesis 1. When God declares the sinner innocent, he actually makes him innocent. Thus justification is a declaration that constitutes the sinner righteous.

Newman wrote:

It [justification] is a pronouncing righteous while it proceeds to make righteous. As Almighty God in the beginning created the world solemnly and in form, speaking the word not to exclude, but to proclaim the deed – as in the days of His flesh He made use of the creature and changed its properties, not without a command; – so does He new-create the soul by the breath of His mouth, by the sacrament of His Voice. The declaration of our righteousness, while it contains pardon for the past, ensures holiness for the future....

God's word, I say, effects what it announces. This is its characteristic all through Scripture. He "callesh those things which be not, as though they are," and forthwith they are. Thus in the beginning He said, "Let there be light, and there was light." Word and deed went together in creation; and so again "in the regeneration"....

It would seem, then, in all cases, that God's word is the instrument of His deed. When, then, He solemnly utters the command, "Let the soul be just," it becomes inwardly just (*Lectures on Justification*, London: Rivington and Parker, 1840, 81, 89, 90).

MacArthur, Newman's unwitting disciple, writes:

If you or I were to declare "things that [are] not as though they were," we would be lying. God can do it because He is God, and His decrees carry the full weight of divine sovereignty. God spoke, and the worlds were created. "What is seen was not made out of things which are visible" (*Hebrews* 11:3). He spoke things that were not, and behold! They were. He can call people, places, and events into existence solely by His divinely sovereign decrees. He can declare believing sinners righteous even though they are not. That is

justification.... Justification is not just a legal fiction (104).

So MacArthur has not changed his mind about justification. He still espouses the Roman Catholic view, and he still attacks the Biblical view as a "legal fiction." By endorsing Newman's view -- and I have no doubt that the endorsement is unwitting -- MacArthur endorses the view that *justification* means "to make righteous." Cardinal Newman's ingenious subversion of the Gospel confused many in the nineteenth century and continues to do so today.

Demonic Orthodoxy

This is the actual subhead that appears on page 150 of *Faith Works*, and MacArthur seems intent on maximizing the orthodoxy of the demons. He does this in several ways, including rehearsing the errors of Thomas Manton. MacArthur writes: "Orthodox doctrine by itself is no proof of saving faith" (151). Now if he means merely understanding orthodox doctrine but not believing it is no proof of saving faith, he would be quite correct. Unfortunately that is not what he means. He means to attack belief itself.

On page 142 he writes:

"It is evident that there is faith and FAITH," Roy Aldrich wrote in reference to *James 2*. "There is nominal faith and real faith. There is intellectual faith and heart faith. There is sensual faith and there is spiritual faith. There is dead faith and there is vital faith. There is traditional faith, which may fall short of transforming personal faith. There is faith that may be commended as orthodox and yet have no more saving value than the faith of demons." James attacks all brands of "faith" that fall short of the biblical standard. What I and others have sometimes termed "mental acquiescence" or "intellectual assent," James

characterizes as mere hearing, empty profession, demonic orthodoxy, and dead faith.

In this paragraph one can see that the focus of so much Protestantism has been the subjective nature of faith. According to these theologians, it is the subjective nature of faith -- not the object of faith, not truth, not orthodoxy, not Christ -- that makes faith saving. This subjective focus has led to a great deal of spiritual navel contemplation among so-called Protestants, trying desperately to make sure that they not only believe, but also "trust," "surrender" and "commit" as well. In fact, many become preoccupied with commitment, surrender, and works, and ignore belief, for even the devils believe. Thus, by a diabolical psychological trick, they are led away from the very thing that can save them: belief of the truth.

Conclusion

There seem to be fewer errors and less confusion in this book than there were in *The Gospel According to Jesus*, but the central and fatal errors about faith and justification remain. One of the reasons for the persistence of these errors may be that MacArthur seems to be quite unfamiliar with the work of Gordon Clark. Publishing a book on theology in the last decade of the twentieth century and not evidencing some acquaintance with Clark's 40 books is somewhat like publishing a book in the last decade of the sixteenth century and failing to cite Luther or Calvin. MacArthur, like so many other contemporary theologians, has left unread the books he ought to have read, and has read the books he ought not to have read. The result is theological confusion and error.

Postscript

On October 31, 2000, Phillip R. Johnson, aide and ghostwriter for John MacArthur, posted this notice to a small discussion group on the Internet:

"Several years ago I [John MacArthur] made some inaccurate statements that have unfortunately confused people about where I

stand on the doctrine of justification by faith. While teaching a series on this crucial issue, I made the point that God does not justify anyone whom He does not also sanctify. That is true. Unfortunately, however, I also implied that God's sanctifying work in us may in part provide the ground on which He declares us righteous. That is not true. I also suggested that God's righteousness is infused into believers in a way that makes their justification something more than a forensic declaration. That is emphatically not true.

commentary on Romans, and other books and tapes. We only wish he had published this closet retraction as widely as he had published his errors.

John Robbins

"This error was confined to a single series preached several years ago. But some of the misstatements were published in a study guide and in the first edition of my Romans commentary. When I realized my error, I withdrew the study guide from publication. It is no longer available. Furthermore, I immediately corrected the Romans commentary. Only a few relatively minor changes were necessary, and those revisions appear in later printings of the book.

"For the record, I have never believed that we can be justified because of anything good in us (Phil. 3:9). Scripture clearly teaches that God accepts us and declares us righteous only because of Christ's perfect righteousness, which is imputed to us by faith alone (Rom. 4:1-6). God's ongoing work of making us righteous is properly labeled sanctification--and should be carefully distinguished from justification. I hereby retract any earlier statements I ever made to the contrary.

John MacArthur"

Although Mr. MacArthur does not mention "The Gospel According to Jesus" or other works criticized in this Review, nor has this statement ever been published in any of his books (at least MacArthur's aide Phillip Johnson failed to provide us with a citation after repeated questioning), we are glad that MacArthur has made at least some attempt to acknowledge and correct the false ideas on justification he taught in tens of thousands of copies of "The Gospel According to Jesus," his