

A Review of John MacArthur's The Gospel According to Jesus

Presented to: Evangelical Theological Society, March 18, 1989

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Though it has been less than a year since MacArthur's latest book was published, it is already recognized as a work of great influence and controversy among Evangelicals. The book's target audience (everyone who is concerned about salvation, whether they be clergy or lay people), its theme (the Gospel which saves people from eternal damnation), and its style (a carefully marshalled polemic), make this a work which cannot be ignored. Whatever one believes about MacArthur's conclusions, the contemporary significance of this book must not be underestimated. I am aware of several churches and schools which are re-evaluating their doctrinal statements, amending job applications, and altering their presentations of the Gospel as a direct result of this book.

Unfortunately, the subject matter easily lends itself to visceral reactions. None of us come to this subject free of emotionally based biases. All Christians have been hurt in terms of corporate testimony, if not personally, by the ungodly behavior of others who claim to be spiritual brothers and sisters. Most of us have encountered people who claim to be Christians, but live as unadulterated pagans. What are we to make of this phenomenon? Could these people really be regenerate? As the moral fabric of the secular society continues to deteriorate,¹ most Christians find this kind of hypocrisy among professing Christians to be increasingly odious. The secular community has had a field day exposing the dirty laundry of television evangelists.² How are we to evaluate their behavior and their ministries? Have they been preaching a false gospel of cheap grace to hide their own sordid lifestyles?

As the title suggests, MacArthur's focus is on the teachings of Jesus as they relate to eternal life. The book is well organized, and incorporates a very thorough subject and Scripture index. John Piper somewhat tongue-in-cheek comments on the first few pages of MacArthur's latest work: "When latter-day Puritans J. I. Packer and James Boice both write enthusiastic forewords for a confessed 'premillennial dispensationalist' (p. 25), the

¹For example, the "I Love Lucy" show scandalized the entertainment industry when the word "pregnant" was used in one of the episodes. This of course was applied to a married woman (Lucy) who was not even depicted as sleeping in the same bed as her husband. The moral degeneration seen in public entertainment in the past three decades is nothing less than astounding.

²For example, not only have the talk show hosts and pornographic magazines exploited these recent scandals, but several popular rock musicians are also finding them a rich medium for attacking American evangelists as well as Christianity itself. See Peter Crescenti, "Pop Stars Blast Evangelists," Christianity Today (March 3, 1989), p.63.

common adversary must be ominous. What alarm welded this unusual coalition?¹ Piper's question is applicable to each section of the book. The somewhat militant tone struck in the first few pages of The Gospel According to Jesus, highlights the tone throughout.

John MacArthur has made many significant contributions to American Evangelicalism through his books, sermons, local church leadership, and the ministry of Master's college and seminary. He is to be commended for addressing such an important topic as the Biblical nature of the Gospel. This book reflects both pastoral concern and broad research,² and contains a great amount of helpful material. Unfortunately, MacArthur's tone is extremely polemical. In this reviewer's opinion, he is so concerned with what he sees as the errors of the opposing theological camp, that he has all but eliminated the common ground he shares with his theological opponents.

MacArthur organizes his work into four main divisions: a look at the issues; Jesus heralds His Gospel (what Jesus really taught about eternal life); Jesus illustrates His Gospel (an evaluation of five crucial parables); and Jesus qualifies His Gospel (the parameters of saving faith). He concludes the book with two appendixes, one on the Gospel according to the apostles, and one on the historicity of the lordship view.

The Issues

It is important to realize that lordship salvation³ involves two distinct issues. MacArthur identifies these twin pillars at the onset of the book. The first pillar deals with the nature of saving faith itself. He explains:

Some may think I question the genuineness of anyone converted to Christ without a full understanding of His lordship. That is not the case. In fact, I am certain that while some understand more than others, no one who is saved fully understands all the implications of Jesus' lordship at the moment of conversion. I am, however, equally certain that **no one can be saved who is either unwilling to obey Christ or**

¹John Piper, "Putting God Back into Faith," The Standard (February, 1989), p.54.

²For a book targeting a largely lay audience, it is replete with footnotes and references to the views of those who hold positions contrary to his own. The seven page bibliography is quite helpful for doing additional research on the subject.

³The term "lordship salvation" is actually pejorative, in that it was coined by those who believe that lordship or submission must be clearly divorced from salvation, or else salvation by works will result. MacArthur is aware of this, but continues to use the term for the sake of argument (p. 28-29). One alternative would be to call this position the "Puritan view," as Puritan literature clearly attests to their adherence to this position. Thus, they spoke not of "eternal security" but of "perseverance of the saints." The point is that God does not grant security to everyone who says he or she has accepted Christ, but rather to those who demonstrate the reality of their faith by their perseverance in righteousness throughout the course of their life (p. 98).

consciously rebellious against the lordship of Christ (emphasis mine).¹

The second pillar deals with the result of genuine salvation. MacArthur asserts:

I have never taught that some pre-salvation works of righteousness are necessary to or part of salvation. But I do believe without apology that **real salvation cannot and will not fail to produce works of righteousness in the life of a true believer**...The very essence of God's saving work is the transformation of the will that results in love for God (emphasis mine).²

In short, MacArthur is first of all saying that submission is always implicit in saving or regenerating faith. In other words, one can not place saving faith in Christ while consciously rejecting His authority. Second, after conversion, a true Christian will always give some evidence of his or her salvation in the form of righteous deeds (fruit).

In developing these two soteriological concepts, MacArthur is essentially responding to the writings of several men associated with Dallas Seminary. Lewis Sperry Chafer was one of the earliest Dallas professors to divorce lordship from salvation. He taught, "to impose a need to surrender the life to God as an added condition of salvation is most unreasonable. God's call to the unsaved is never said to be unto the lordship of Christ."³ In light of Chafer's influence upon subsequent theologians, I have labeled this view the "Chaferian model." MacArthur exerts most of his energy responding to two more recent Dallas professors, Zane Hodges⁴ and Charles Ryrie.

The Tone of the Discussion

All the principals agree that lordship salvation deals with critical doctrinal issues. MacArthur notes,

"No more serious question faces the church today. It can be phrased in many ways: What is the gospel? Must a person accept Jesus as Savior

¹p. xiii-xiv.

²p. xiii.

³Lewis Sperry Chafer, Systematic Theology (Dallas: Dallas Seminary, 1948), 3:385.

⁴Zane Hodges is the most influential spokesman for the Chaferian view. Consequently, he garners seventeen entries in MacArthur's subject index. Hodges' book, The Gospel Under Siege, published in 1981, has been the most influential work written to date from a Chaferian perspective. For a specific lordship response to The Gospel Under Siege, see William G. Bjork, "A Critique of Zane Hodges' The Gospel Under Siege: A Review Article," Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society (December, 1987), p. 457-467.

and Lord in order to be saved? What is saving faith? How should we invite men and women to Christ? and What is salvation?¹

Livingston Blauvelt Jr., who writes from a Chaferian perspective, concurs with the importance of the Lordship salvation issue:

The issue of so-called lordship salvation is important, for it concerns one of the fundamentals of the faith—a truth basic to God's plan of salvation and the assurance of everlasting life. Many Christians, and countless others on the brink of believing, are confused regarding the answer to the question 'What must I do to be saved?'²

MacArthur and his Chaferian counterparts hold forth a veneer of brotherly kindness in their writings, and carefully avoid using the term "heretical" to describe the other position.³ Unfortunately, this veneer is quite thin, and quickly gives way to acrimonious misunderstandings and distortions. MacArthur says, "I am concerned that readers not interpret my criticism as a condemnation of the men, their personal character, or their ministries."⁴ This caveat is mitigated by a previous statement in the preface which implies that those who disagree with him on lordship salvation are responsible for sending people to hell. He states, "This means that whoever is wrong on this question is proclaiming a message that can send people to hell."⁵ While he might have been correct to say that those who remove all elements of submission (lordship) from saving faith are confusing the nature of the gospel, he has greatly overstated the problem by implying that those who separate lordship from saving faith are responsible for sending people to hell. Both camps are guilty of making serious erroneous statements about the other. These incorrect statements are largely based on a misunderstanding of the theological truths shared by both views.

MacArthur goes even farther in impugning those of the Chaferian camp by implying that Galatians 1:6-8 is related to the lordship salvation controversy.⁶ Though MacArthur only refers to the verses which speak of those who preach another (*ἕτερος*— "another of a different kind") Gospel, verse nine clearly indicates this false gospel and those who preach it are heretical.

¹xiv.

²Livingston Blauvelt Jr., "Does the Bible Teach Lordship Salvation?" Bibliotheca Sacra (January-March, 1986), p. 37.

³see Boice's comments in the forward, p. xii.

⁴p. xv.

⁵p. xiv.

⁶p. 17.

In fairness, we should note that MacArthur did not instigate this acerbic reference to Galatians 1. Charles Ryrie several years earlier said,

"The importance of this question cannot be overestimated in relation to both salvation and sanctification. The message of faith only and the message of faith plus commitment of life cannot both be the gospel; therefore, one of them is a false gospel and comes under the curse of perverting the gospel or preaching another gospel (Gal. 1:6-9), and this is a very serious matter.¹

Both men have very incorrectly applied Galatians 1 to each other (or at least to those who hold the other view). Paul understood the "other Gospel preaching" referred to in Galatians 1 to be such a radical departure from orthodoxy that he needed to use an imperative form of the verb $\epsilon\upsilon\iota$ to pronounce the false preachers accursed, or eternally damned. J. B. Lightfoot notes that the noun $\alpha\nu\alpha\theta\eta\mu\alpha$ is not used in this passage to denote an ecclesiastical censure (excommunication) but a spiritual condition. He says the word is employed here just as it is in the Old Testament, where it refers to "a person or thing set apart and devoted to destruction, because hateful to God. Hence in a spiritual application it denotes the state of one who is alienated from God by sin."² It seems clear from the rest of The Gospel According to Jesus, that MacArthur is not seeking to call his theological opponents "heretics bound for hell because of their hatred for God." Hence, neither he nor the Chaferian theologians should relate Galatians 1:6-9 to the issue of lordship salvation. This serves no purpose but to create misunderstandings and bitter feelings.

Darrell Bock closes his very helpful review of The Gospel According to Jesus, with a timely petition:

This review concludes with a solemn plea because of the history of this debate. Can the Christian community engage in this discussion without raising charges of teaching "heresy" or a "false gospel"? These emotive responses prevent open discussion and emotionally charge the atmosphere. Some may argue that this plea compromises the truth, but

¹Charles C. Ryrie, Balancing the Christian Life (Chicago: Moody Press, 1969), p. 170. Fortunately, MacArthur is not as harsh as some of his predecessors. For example, see A. W. Tozer, I Call It Heresy! (Harrisburg, Pa.: Christian Publications, 1974).

²J. B. Lightfoot, The Epistle of Saint Paul to the Galatians (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing Co., 1957), p. 78.

that is not the intent. The intent is to allow the body of Christ to pursue the truth without each side having to dig in and defend its orthodoxy.¹

Bock has astutely identified one of the primary prerequisites for possibly transforming the lordship salvation question from a divisive, destructive debate into a beneficial, salubrious discussion.² We must not start our discussion by emphasizing our differences, and implying the other camp is heretical, but by evaluating our theological agreements.

Crucial Areas of Agreement

We live in a culture which is increasingly hostile to Christianity and Christian values. Millions in our country and around the world are in desperate need of the life transforming grace of God. He has chosen us to be his earthly representatives, showing forth His glorious light in a pitch-black world (11 Cor. 5:20; Phil. 2:15). The task before us is great. We cannot engage in successful spiritual battle by shooting our comrades. Some will argue that I am contributing to the ongoing distortion of the gospel by ignoring the nature of the theological differences between these two views (one or both of which must be at least partially incorrect, as some of their tenets are mutually exclusive). On the contrary, I will point out what I believe are numerous errors resident in both positions.

We must to clarify our common ground (the areas of crucial theological agreement). Both MacArthur and the Chaferians: hold to the inerrancy and absolute authority of Scripture, clearly teach that God is holy and His children should reflect His character through holy living, assert that the human race is utterly depraved and unable through good works to secure any divine merit, insist that the salvation of men and women rests solely on the finished work of Christ on the cross, and assert that the merits of Christ's work must be individually appropriated by faith. While some of these truths may not be readily seen, a careful study of the literature presenting these two views will reveal these areas of crucial theological agreement. Unfortunately, both sides have significantly underemphasized or ignored certain truths, which promptly generates questions about orthodoxy.

Mutual Misunderstandings

¹Darrell Bock, "A Review of The Gospel According to Jesus." Bibliotheca Sacra (January-March, 1989), p. 39.

²Bock notes elsewhere that Lewis Sperry Chafer ministered closely with H. A. Ironside as well as with W. H. Griffith-Thomas, in spite of the stark differences Chafer had with both men on the doctrine of lordship salvation. Apparently, they discussed these theological differences at length through written correspondence, but refused to allow their doctrinal differences to ruin their relationships or their joint ministries. See Darrell Bock, unpublished article entitled MacArthur Review, third revision, written for Dallas Theological Seminary faculty discussion, 9/21/88.

Those holding a Chaferian view have repeatedly accused MacArthur and others who hold to lordship salvation of teaching salvation by works. In an article originally published in Signal (the Awana club magazine), this false accusation is clearly seen:

They say that a person needs to be qualified for salvation by making Jesus Lord (Master). But the lordship of Christ as a prerequisite for salvation places emphasis on works rather than grace. God does not need anything from man. His salvation is an unconditional gift.¹

Mr. Wagner's first statement is a gross distortion of the lordship position, for no one in this camp is saying that a sinner can make him or herself worthy of salvation. Nor do they say that God needs anything from us. Wagner clearly asserts that those who hold the lordship position are making salvation rest on human works. On the very first page of The Gospel According to Jesus, MacArthur contradicts both of these misconceptions, "Let me say clearly as possible right now that salvation is by God's sovereign grace alone. Nothing a lost, degenerate, spiritually dead sinner can do will in any way contribute to salvation.² While MacArthur argues that the redeemed will do good works, he unequivocally asserts that faith alone saves:

Salvation has always been by grace, through faith, not by the works of the law (Galations 2:16).³

Salvation is a gift, but it is appropriated only through a faith that goes beyond merely understanding and assenting to the truth."⁴

In other words, sanctification is a characteristic of all those who are redeemed, not a condition for their receiving salvation.⁵

Salvation was not a payoff for those who observed the law; it was a gift to those who humbly and by faith sought redemption from their sin.⁶

Part of the problem which has led many to assert that lordship salvation is works salvation is the false assumption that any aspect of submission

¹Rich Wagner, "This So-Called Lordship Salvation," Signal Magazine (November-December, 1986), reprinted in Confident Living (July-August, 1987), p. 54-55.

²p. xiii.

³p. 26.

⁴p. 32.

⁵p. 188.

⁶p. 42. See also pages 31,33,43,87,172,175,181.

inherent in faith must be a form of human works.¹ As we shall see later, this is based on an inadequate view of faith, stemming from an improper bifurcation of the offices of Christ. He is savior, Lord, and king. Bock acknowledges MacArthur is not teaching salvation by works, and suggests that part of the misunderstanding among those who make this claim is that they have failed to recognize MacArthur's deep concerns about false professions of faith.² In other words, his repeated emphasis upon works in the life of the believer is a reflection of his belief that although we are not saved by our works, good works are one of the primary means of distinguishing between true and counterfeit believers. At the same time, MacArthur is prone to make imprecise categorical statements which are easily misunderstood.

The Chaferian view has also been misunderstood by MacArthur, particularly with respect to the presence of sin in the life of the believer. Hodges and his colleagues do not believe that submission is part of saving faith, nor are good works necessary to demonstrate that one is truly a believer. It is patently incorrect, however, to say they believe sin in the life of a believer is insignificant. MacArthur asserts, "Enthusiastic converts to this new gospel believe their behavior has no relationship to their spiritual status—even if they continue wantonly in the grossest kinds of sin and expressions of human depravity."³

Those who have studied under Zane Hodges and Charles Ryrie testify to their personal piety and concern for the godliness of the Christian community. It is essential to remember that while these men deny that lordship is a part of saving faith, they are not denying that Jesus is Lord (master), nor are they disputing that He is to be obeyed by every Christian. They deny (albeit incorrectly) that one should fear missing out on eternal because he or she does not exhibit the fruit of righteousness, but emphatically assert that one who does not live for Christ has much to lose.

Hodges in particular, repeatedly emphasizes the terrible loss of rewards experienced by Christians who do not do practice good works. This is reflected in the subtitle of his most recent book, Grace in Eclipse: a Study in Eternal Rewards. Hodges asserts that Matthew 22:2-14 in speaking of the servants who are cast into outer darkness, refers to unfaithful Christians who will not lose their eternal life, but will suffer heavenly loss. He explains,

¹see Blauvelt, Does the Bible Teach Lordship Salvation? p. 37.

²Darrell Bock, "A Review of The Gospel According to Jesus," p. 25.

³p. 16. A similar sentiment is voiced by A. W. Pink, "To make God's favor a ground of exemption from the performance of duty comes perilously near to turning His grace into lasciviousness." Gleanings from the Scriptures: Man's Total Depravity (Chicago: Moody Press, 1969), p. 291.

No, it is enough to say that the failing Christian has missed a splendid experience of co-reigning with Christ, with all the multiplied joys which that experience implies. It is enough to affirm that he undergoes a significant exclusion from the "light and gladness, joy and honor" (see Esther 8:16) which the co-heirs experience with Christ. Whatever else eternity holds for him, he has at least missed that!¹

One might take issue with Hodges' novel exegesis of Matthew 22 in light of the context (21:31, 39, 41, 43-46), as well as the specific wording of the passage (22:13-14), but it is quite unfair to say (or imply) that Hodges has a cavalier attitude toward sin in the Christian life. Hodges not only deals with the heavenly consequences of ongoing sin in the life of a believer, but he also speaks of severe temporal consequences. In his treatment of James 2:14-26, Hodges says that the Christian who does not deal with personal sin can expect the discipline of God, which in cases of extreme unrepentance means premature physical death.² Anyone who finds in Hodges' writings an excuse for personal antinomianism has not read with comprehension. Heavenly loss of rewards and temporal discipline, even loss of life at the hand of God, make sin a serious entity in the life of a Christian.

Another criticism made by those critical of the Chaferian view is the assertion that the Chaferians mislead unbelievers by refusing to discuss the necessity of changing one's life if he or she becomes a Christian. This criticism is not entirely valid. Michael Cocoris, who is widely quoted by those holding the Chaferian view, relates an incident in which a woman wanted to become a Christian but was not sure she was ready to give up her immoral lifestyle. Cocoris recalls, "I explained that one does not have to stop sinning in order to be saved, but that candidly, if she trusted Christ, God would tell her that it was a sin, and she should stop."³ These examples reveal that those holding a Chaferian view are intensely concerned about the consequences of sin in the life of a believer, though they do not attach the eternal significance to it that MacArthur does.

Strengths of the Book

MacArthur sheds valuable light on the lordship salvation debate by clarifying the meaning of *Κυριος*. He demonstrates the necessity of understanding Lord to mean both God and master. The Chaferian theologians have asserted that *Κυριος*, as it applies to the Gospel, only connotes deity. They argue that only a claim to deity can account for the sharp division among the people over Christ, whereas a claim of being simply "master"

¹Zane Hodges, Grace in Eclipse: a Study in Eternal Rewards, (Dallas: Redencion Viva, 1985), p.90.

²Zane Hodges, The Gospel Under Siege (Dallas: Redencion Viva, 1981), p. 24-25.

³Michael Cocoris, Lordship Salvation- is it Biblical? (Dallas: Redencion Viva, 1983), p.19.

would not produce such a reaction.¹ MacArthur skillfully uses the very concept that **Kyrios** refers to the deity of Christ to demonstrate that submission is inextricably bound to faith in the "Lord" Jesus. He notes,

The fact is, "Lord" does mean "God" in all those verses. More precisely, it means "God who rules," and that only bolsters the arguments for Lordship salvation...Etymologically, **kyrios** comes from a Greek root that means "rule, dominion, or power." Contextually, taking Peter's use of **kyrios** in Acts 2:26, it is important to note that verses 34-35 quote from Psalm 110, a messianic Psalm of rule and dominion.²

MacArthur builds a very strong case for understanding "Lord" to include a concept of authority which necessitates submission. The Messianic Psalms which are applied to Christ in the New Testament give sober testimony that He is not only savior but king. MacArthur notes that Scripture never commands anyone to "make Christ Lord" as the Chaferian theologians repeatedly admonish Christians to do.³ Christ is Lord of all (Ro. 10:14; 14:9; Phil. 2:11). God is the only one who is said to have made Christ Lord (Acts 2:36), which is very significant in that Peter is giving an evangelistic message and uses a Messianic Psalm to show that God has declared Christ not only savior but ruling king. While Christ is not presently sitting on the throne of David ruling as He will in the millennium, He is no less the king.

The Jews were patently wrong to try to set up Christ as an earthly ruler who would shatter the yoke of Rome (6: 15; 12:13), but their error was not in emphasizing the kingly rule of the Messiah, but in having too restrictive a view of his reign, and in demanding that He physically reign in their lifetime. Christ was reluctant to make Messianic claims because of the restrictive Political connotations given to "Messiah" in contemporary Judaism.⁴ At the same time, Christ plainly told Pilate that He was the king (Mat. 21:5; Jn. 18:37). He is repeatedly presented by the writers of the New Testament as the king who rules, in fulfillment of Old Testament Messianic prophecies (Mat. 2:2 and Ez. 21:27, Jer. 23:5,30:9; Mat. 2:6 and Micah 5:2; Luke 1:33 and Dan. 2:44, 7:14,18; Mat 21:5 and Is 62:11, Zech. 9:9).

¹see Ryrie, Balancing the Christian Life, p. 173-174, Cocoris, Lordship Salvation-is it Biblical? p. 13-15. Blauvelt also makes the same claim, quoting A. T. Robertson to show that the Gentiles would have understood **Kyrios** in reference to emperor worship (p.40). Somehow Blauvelt does not realize the implications of this truth for the Chaferian view are devastating. What Roman citizen would have divorced the concept of submission from emperor worship? The emperor was the divine king who was to be assiduously obeyed.

²p. 28-29. See also p. 203-210.

³Ryrie, Balancing the Christian Life, P. 78-79 and Wagner, "This So-Called Lordship Salvation," p. 54-55.

⁴O. A. Piper, "Messiah," in The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986), 3:333.

MacArthur also notes that the book of Acts refers to Christ 92 times as Lord, while referring to Him as savior only twice.¹ The point is that we must not bifurcate the person of Christ. He is God, savior and king. When we exercise saving faith, we are not just believing in Christ as savior, but as God and king.² Thus, we find a repeated emphasis on divine judgment and on the Messianic kingship of Christ in the evangelistic messages in the Book of Acts (13:33; 17:31; 24:25; 26:23). MacArthur has correctly clarified the meaning of Lord, and has cautioned us to place our faith not in a truncated Christ, but in the Christ of Scripture. We must proclaim Him as both the lamb (savior) and the lion (ruler), for He is both (Rev. 5:5-6).³

MacArthur also sheds valuable light on the lordship salvation debate by emphasizing the danger of false profession. While he at times seems to overstate the point, he is attempting to correct a weakness in Chaferian teaching with respect to false professors, viz. they are given little or no treatment.⁴ In light of our Lord's somber words to the false professors in Matthew 7:23, this is stunning omission. MacArthur's intense concern for this problem is evidenced by the fact that in five different sections of the book he deals with Matthew 7:21-23.⁵ He is concerned that in American Evangelicalism "anyone who has 'accepted Christ' is enthusiastically received as a Christian, even if his supposed faith later gives way to a persistent pattern of disobedience, gross sin, or hostile unbelief."⁶ He is aware of the problem in identifying false professors, in that true believers can fall into sin or even denial of Christ (Peter, John Mark, the immoral believers in 1 Cor. 5, etc.). He clarifies the issue of false professors by examining the life of Judas, one of the most well known false professors in the New Testament. He concludes,

¹p. 207.

²p. 209-210.

³This is a point of great distinction between the two views of lordship salvation. Hodges notes, "Those who believe themselves Christians but have never understood the gospel offer must also be considered false professors, however sincere they may be in their error. For one cannot believe what one does not know or understand" (Grace in Eclipse, p. 11-12). If ignorance regarding the gospel message is so important, why does this principle not apply to the offices of Christ? Non-Christians need to understand His work on the cross as well as His position as king. It is hard to understand how it can be asserted that someone is believing in Christ if that individual refuses to believe in one the most significant things about Him, i. e., He is the king who will someday judge the world (Acts 17:30-31).

⁴For example, in his article "Untrustworthy Believers," in the April-June 1978 issue of Bibliotheca Sacra, p. 139-152, he says John 2:23-25 is speaking about true but untrustworthy believers. In The Gospel Under Siege he goes against a widespread and long standing exegetical tradition in declaring that James 2 and the Book of 1 John are not warning against false profession (p. 19-33, 47-66).

⁵p. 22, 90, 188-92, 198-99, 203-204.

⁶p. 97.

The mark of a true disciple is not that he never sins, but rather that when he does sin he inevitably returns to the Lord to receive forgiveness and cleansing. Unlike a false disciple, the true disciple will never turn away completely. He may occasionally turn back to his fishing nets, but ultimately he is drawn again to the master.¹

Though the disciples also fell away from Christ at the time of the betrayal, MacArthur notes a marked difference between the fearful, sinning believers and the false professor, viz., the disciples eventually returned to the Lord.

Finally, MacArthur sheds valuable light on the lordship salvation debate by documenting the widespread historical support of the lordship view. In appendix 2 MacArthur responds to Hodges' assertion that the lordship position is a "modern assault on the integrity of the Gospel."² MacArthur has done a commendable job of gathering evidence to show that the lordship position has a long standing history among Evangelicals. One of the most interesting lordship quotes comes from W. H. Griffith Thomas, one of the founders of Dallas Seminary. In his commentary on Romans, Griffith Thomas states,

It is only as we surrender to Him as Lord that we receive our pardon from Him as our Savior. We have to admit Him to reign on the throne of the heart, and it is only when He is glorified in our hearts as King that the Holy Spirit enters and abides.³

Predictably, MacArthur uses many Puritan writers for support, though it is unfortunate that he gathers little material from the early church fathers. While Scripture, not church tradition, is the final arbiter of truth, MacArthur has certainly demonstrated that he is not the inventor of a new soteriological view. He has put the burden on the Chaferian theologians to demonstrate that their position has historical support.⁴

¹p. 104, see also p. 199.

²p. 221. The statement by Hodges comes from The Gospel Under Siege, p. 4.

³W. H. Griffith Thomas, St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., n.d.), p. 371.

⁴Note also D. A. Carson's assertion that Hodges' exegesis of key lordship texts finds little if any confirmation by other exegetes throughout the course of church history, Exegetical Fallacies (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), p. 137. In light of the Protestant understanding of tradition, Carson's criticism is not necessarily fatal to Hodges (a point Carson concedes), but it does warrant sober consideration.

Weaknesses of the Book

My greatest problem this book lies not so much in what MacArthur has said, as in what he has not said. Specifically, one of the greatest weaknesses of The Gospel According to Jesus is that there is little room in MacArthur's model for someone to sin or fail in the Christian life and still be a genuine Christian. MacArthur is correct to assert that a genuine Christian will not completely or permanently apostatize (1 Jn. 2:19). He is also correct to assert that one who is regenerate will give at least some evidence of his or her conversion in a changed life. At the same time, MacArthur has pressed this model so far that he essentially fails to acknowledge the possibility of a Christian flagrantly sinning and having the outward appearance of an unbeliever (1 Cor. 3:2).

The Corinthians were undoubtedly the most immature group of Christians in the New Testament. While Paul did admonish them to test themselves to make sure they were truly of the faith (1 Cor. 11:30), this was not the focus of his message to them. MacArthur on the other hand, so stresses the danger of false profession, that he seems to make no allowance for the possibility of flagrant sin in the life of a professing Christian. MacArthur's categorical statements on this subject are at best misleading. For example, he says,

Who are the true sheep? The ones who follow. Who are the ones who follow? The ones who are given eternal life. 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.¹

MacArthur does soften this rigid description of a believer in a footnote, but in light of the great number of categorical statements like this, the footnote loses its force. It is significant to note that three different times MacArthur refers to 1 Cor. 13:5, which deals with the danger of false profession.² On the other hand, he makes no reference to 1 Cor. 3:11-15, which deals with the loss of rewards for believers who do not serve Christ as they ought, or to 1 Cor. 11:30, which deals with the death of believers who were sinning at the Lord's Supper, (and in a sense failed in the Christian life). Rewards are not even listed in the subject index of The Gospel According to Jesus. It would appear that MacArthur, in his own words "has not allowed for any middle ground." He has left very little room for a true believer to fall into flagrant sin.

This weakness is also reflected in his failure to address the subject of church discipline. He makes no reference to Matthew 18:15-20 or to 11

¹p. 178.

²p. 23, 190, 197.

Thes. 3:14-15, which admonishes the Thessalonians not to regard a sinning believer as an enemy, but as a brother to be admonished.

This weakness may appear to conflict with the principle that one who is regenerate will give at least some evidence of his or her conversion in a changed life. Both 1 John and James affirm this principle. The resolution to this apparent conflict lies in John's careful use of verb tenses. He repeatedly uses the present tense to indicate that a true believer will, over the course of time, demonstrate changed behavior which differs from an unbeliever (2:4, 9, 11; 3:6-10; 4:20).

Another way to state this weakness is to say that MacArthur fails to distinguish levels of discipleship. He is correct to say that all believers are called to follow Christ, and in this sense, all believers are disciples. The term "disciple" is used in the Book of Acts to identify believers (6:1, 2, 7; 11:26; 14:20, 22; 15:10).¹ At the same time, Scripture speaks of weak disciples who are following other humans instead of Christ (1 Cor. 3:3-5). Consequently, the commands given in Scripture to disciples are not necessarily addressed to those contemplating initial discipleship (cf. 1 Cor. 9:24-27).

Another weakness of The Gospel According to Jesus lies in the confusing qualifiers MacArthur uses to describe the relationship between submission and saving faith. In one instance he states,

I do not believe, and have never taught, that a person coming to Christ must understand fully all the implications of sin, repentance, or the lordship of Christ. Even after growing in his understanding for years as a Christian, he will not know all of these things in their full depth. But there must be a **willingness** to obey (emphasis his).²

This statement would seem to be in keeping with the Biblical concept of accepting Christ as savior and lord at the point of salvation. Willingness to obey seems to be an accurate way of expressing one's acceptance of the kingship of Christ.

Bock lucidly clarifies this concept of willingness by saying that if an individual interested in becoming a Christian is absolutely unwilling to give up a particular sin, then he or she most likely does not understand the nature of God, the nature of grace, the seriousness of sin, or the need to have sins forgiven. In other words,

¹p. 196.

²p. 87-88.

One can wonder if a person is genuinely coming to Jesus as Lord Almighty, the Dispenser of divine salvation and forgiveness. If there is a sin that person thinks does not need forgiving, how can that person say he is coming to Christ for the forgiveness of sins?¹

In other words, willingness to obey is necessary if one is truly coming to the Jesus of Scripture to be saved. On the other hand, as Bock also notes, some people ask if they have to give up their sins to be saved, not because they are rejecting the lordship of Christ, but because they are afraid of their own ability to overcome sin. It is consequently of extreme importance that we not send out a mixed messages with respect to willingness to obey.

Unfortunately, MacArthur does send out mixed messages. As we noted, in some portions of the book he speaks of saving faith as a general willingness to obey God. At other times he speaks of saving faith being, "an unconditional surrender, a willingness to do anything the Lord demands."² By this definition of faith, very few individuals (including Peter and John Mark) truly possess saving faith. Much of MacArthur's equivocation in terms comes from a misunderstanding of the hyperbolic nature of Jesus' teachings and from his insistence on focusing on selective details of the parables, instead of on the main ideas being expressed. For example, notice what MacArthur infers about saving faith based on the parable of the prodigal son. He asserts,

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 his father asked of him...His demeanor was one of **unconditional** surrender, a **complete** resignation of self and absolute submission to his father. That is the essence of saving faith (emphasis mine).³

MacArthur has missed the contextual essence of this parable, in addition to embellishing the story itself. Christ gave these three parables in response to the Pharisee's criticism of his ministry to sinners (15:1-2). The three parables are primarily given to clarify the object of the Father's love (sinners), not to clarify the nature of the sinners faith. This kind of selective attention to parabolic detail while ignoring the broader context is, at best, problematic.

¹ Darrell Bock, "Jesus as Lord in Acts and in the Gospel Message," Bibliotheca Sacra (April-June, 1986), p. 153.

² p. 140.

³ p. 153.

Conclusion

The fruit of MacArthur's diligent work will reward readers of The Gospel According to Jesus. He clarifies the issues, particularly the nature of lordship, as he demonstrates its intrinsic inclusion of both deity and sovereignty. He has dutifully cautioned the Christian community of the dangers of false profession. His demonstration of the historicity of the lordship position demands careful consideration. At the same time, his polemic tone and preoccupation with demonstrating the errors of the Chaferian school will not contribute to healthy dialogue or increased understanding of the issues. The failure to address adequately the possibility of sin and failure in the Christian life, the oversimplification of discipleship, and the confusing use of qualifiers to describe the relationship between submission and saving faith, and will lead some to conclude that faith alone does not save. MacArthur has made several contributions to the lordship debate, though The Gospel According to Jesus must be read with great care.