

Christian Reconstruction

Isaiah 61:4

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JOHN MacARTHUR'S BOMBSHELL

by Gary North

What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith, and have not works? can faith save him? If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, And one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit? Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone. Yea, a man may say, Thou hast faith, and I have works: shew me thy faith without thy works, and I will shew thee my faith by my works. Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble (James 2:14-19).

John MacArthur, Jr. is one of the major figures in the dispensational world. He has a large church in southern California. His father started it, but he has expanded it. He is a popular speaker. He is also an author. When he speaks, a lot of people listen. When he writes, a lot of people read.

His new book, *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Zondervan Academic Books, 1988) was one of 1988's best-selling hardback Christian books. It has created a sensation. Here is a major dispensationalist author who chose to have J. I. Packer, Calvinist theologian and neo-Puritan college professor, write one Foreword, and James Montgomery Boyce, Calvinist theologian and Presbyterian minister, to write a second Foreword. But even more surprising, they both consented to write.

Something very peculiar is going on here.

Boyce writes:

In The Gospel According to Jesus, MacArthur is not dealing with some issue or issues external to the faith, but with the central issue of all, namely, What does it mean to be a Christian? His answers address themselves to what I consider to be the greatest weakness of contemporary evangelical Christianity in America.

Did I say weakness? It is more. It is a tragic error. It is the idea—where did it ever come from?—that one can be a Christian without being a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ. It reduces the gospel to the mere fact of Christ's having died for sinners, requires of sinners only that they acknowledge this by the barest intellectual assent, and then assures them of their eternal security when they may very well not be born again. This view bends faith far beyond recognition—at least for those who know what the Bible says about faith—and promises a false peace to thousands who have given verbal assent to this reductionist Christianity but are not truly in God's family (p. xi).

Boyce then goes on to quote Matthew 10:22, the verse that defends the traditional Calvinist doctrine of the perseverance of the saints: "And ye shall be hated of all men

for my name's sake: but he that endureth to the end shall be saved." Then he cites Luke 6:46: "And why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?" Then he cites Luke 9:23: "And he said to them all, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me." And finally, he cites Hebrews 12:14: "Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord."

You mean that the Bible teaches that without **holiness**—ethical set-apartness—the professing Christian's verbal confession faith in Christ is of zero value? Worse: that his verbal profession in fact will testify against him eternally in the lake of fire? You mean to say, as MacArthur says, that

Real salvation is not only justification. It cannot be isolated from regeneration, sanctification and, ultimately, glorification. Salvation is an ongoing process as much as it is a past event. It is the work of God through which we are "conformed to the image of His Son" (Romans 8:29, cf. Romans 13:11). Genuine assurance comes from seeing the Holy Spirit's transforming work in one's life, not from clinging to the memory of some experience (p. 23).

Oh, my! To say that this book is causing consternation in the "just confess Jesus as Savior, but not necessarily as Lord, and be saved" camp is putting it mildly. Dr. MacArthur has done more than launch a torpedo into the side of the good ship *Antinomianism*; he has in fact detonated a charge from deep inside its bulwarks.

What Is the Target of His Attack?

His target is the theology (soteriology) of C. I. Scofield, Lewis Sperry Chafer, Charles C. Ryrie, Zane C. Hodges, and Col. R. B. Thieme, whose works MacArthur footnotes scrupulously and refutes thoroughly. It is a full-scale assault on the theological foundations of Dallas Seminary, *Moody Monthly*, and almost every independent Bible church and Bible college in the country.

Whose writings does he use in order to refute dispensationalism's ethics? Calvinist Presbyterians Benjamin B. Warfield, Geerhardus Vos, and J. Gresham Machen, Calvinist Baptist Arthur Pink, the Puritans, and Calvinist-charismatic Martyn Lloyd-Jones. Oh yes, and Ken Gentry, whose two books on the pre-70 A.D. dating of the Book of Revelation I.C.E. will publish within the next three months.

Something **very** peculiar is going on here.

He starts out by announcing clearly 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, commit-

ment, 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 are any part of salvation" (p. xiii). So much for Arminianism, "free will," and the agreed-upon theology of 95% of those who call themselves evangelicals today. But he does not stop with the doctrines of total depravity and salvation by grace alone. He immediately goes to ethics: the doctrine of **progressive sanctification**:

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. There are no human works in the saving act, but God's work of salvation includes a change of intent, will, desire, and attitude that inevitably produce the fruit of the Spirit. The very essence of God's saving work is the transformation of the will that results in a love for God. Salvation thus establishes the root that will surely produce the fruit (p. xiii).

What is also astounding is that this dispensationalist author actually cites the very verses we Calvinists appeal to in demonstrating that God's grace includes **predestined** good works, Ephesians 2:8-10: "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them" (pp. 95-96). Fundamentalists almost never quote Ephesians 2:10. MacArthur does. He even refers the reader to James 2:14-26, the New Testament's premier passage on faith and good works.

Then MacArthur goes for the jugular. After affirming dutifully that "Dispensationalism is a fundamentally correct system of understanding God's program through the ages" (p. 25), he then rejects on the same page the number-one thesis of dispensationalism, the distinction between ages of law and grace.

The age of law/age of grace distinction in particular has wreaked havoc on dispensationalist theology and contributed to confusion about the doctrine of salvation. Of course, there is an important distinction to be made between law and grace. But it is wrong to conclude, as Chafer apparently did, that law and grace are mutually exclusive in the program of God for any age.

Next, he goes after the traditional dispensationalist dichotomy between the Sermon on the Mount ("law for Israel and the Jewish-Christian Millennium only") and the Church Age. He cites Clarence Larkin's 1918 standard, *Dispensational Truth*, in which Larkin affirmed that the teachings of Jesus delivered in His Sermon on the Mount "have no application to the Christian, but only to those who are under the Law, and therefore must apply to another Dispensation than this" (p. 26). To which MacArthur replies:

But that is a dangerous and untenable presupposition. Jesus did not come to proclaim a message that would be invalid until the Tribulation or the Millennium. He came to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10). He came to call sinners to repentance (Matthew 9:13). He came so the world through Him might be saved (John 3:17). He proclaimed the saving gospel, not merely a manifesto for some future age (p. 27).

Ideas Have Consequences

MacArthur tells us frankly what traditional dispensational theology's rampant antinomianism has produced: churches filled with immorality.

One of the most malignant by-products of the debacle in contemporary evangelism is a gospel that fails to confront individuals with the reality of their sin. Even the most conservative churches are teeming with people who, claiming to be born again, live like pagans. Contemporary Christians have been conditioned never to question anyone's salvation. If a person declares he has trusted Christ as Savior, no one challenges his testimony, regardless of how inconsistent his life-style may be with God's Word (p. 59).

Who teaches such doctrines of "once saved, always saved, no matter what"? Col. Bob Thieme does. Yes, the man who had the world's largest tape ministry in the early 1960's. MacArthur cites Thieme's book, *Apes and Peacocks in Pursuit of Happiness* (1973): "It is possible, even probable, that when a believer out of fellowship falls for certain types of philosophy, if he is a logical thinker, will become an 'unbelieving believer.' Yet believers who become agnostics are still saved; they are still born again. You can even become an atheist; but once you accept Christ as savior, you cannot lose your salvation, even though you deny God" (Thieme, p. 23; MacArthur, pp. 97-98). So much for I John 2:19: "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us: but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us."

Conclusion

This book is excellent—the best theological book by a dispensationalist in our generation. Let us hope that the rumor is not true, namely, that Dr. MacArthur is being pressured to remove his book from circulation. If he does, he will never recover his academic reputation. He published it just as he was starting The Master's Seminary to replace Talbot Seminary, which has abandoned its dispensational roots and is heading into . . . ? Writing this took great courage. I suggest that you buy a copy as soon as possible. It will remain a classic, whether or not it is recalled from circulation (but especially if it is).

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