

**John MacArthur:
A Pastor's Dilemma
or
John MacArthur's Doctrinal Deviations
and Ethical Expediencies**

(A Personal Perspective)

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separate from heretical brethren and warn others of their errors? As we attempt to resolve the question in our own minds, may the Holy Spirit give us His discernment to follow the divinely mandated procedure outlined by Paul as we "mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them" (Romans 16:17-18).

1. HIS DEFENSE OF LORDSHIP SALVATION

MacArthur has written two books in defense of Lordship salvation, *The Gospel According to Jesus* and *Faith Works—The Gospel According to the Disciples*. Furthermore, he has authored numerous articles and preached many messages on Lordship salvation, insisting that an individual is not genuinely saved unless he has dedicated his life.

Here is MacArthur's position:

"The call to Calvary must be recognized for what it is: a call to discipleship under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. To respond to that call is to become a believer. Anything less is simply unbelief." (*The Gospel According to Jesus*, p. 30. Quotations from his work are taken from the first edition, published in 1989).

"Forsaking oneself for Christ's sake is not an optional step of discipleship subsequent to conversion: it is the *sine qua non* of saving faith" (*Ibid.*, p. 35, italics in the original).

"Let me say again unequivocally that Jesus' summons to deny self and follow him was an invitation to salvation" (*Ibid.*, p. 196).

"Submission to the will of God, to Christ's lordship, and to the guiding of the Spirit is an essential, not an optional part of saving faith" (*Ephesians*, p. 249).

"Saving faith is placing oneself totally in submission to the Lord Jesus Christ" (*Romans 1-8*, p. 205).

"You give up all that you are and receive all that He is. . . . A person becomes saved when he is willing to abandon everything he has to affirm that Christ is the Lord of his life" (*The Parables of the Kingdom*, p. 109).

John MacArthur makes full surrender to Christ's Lordship a requisite for salvation. In fact, as Paul taught in Romans 12:1-2, dedication is an important response to the cause of salvation. Biblically, faith is the only prerequisite for salvation, yet, MacArthur, quoting with approval in his magazine *Masterpiece* (Fall 1988) A. W. S. article "I CALL IT HERESY!" labeled such a view as heresy.

Salvation is either by faith alone or by faith, dedication, and surrender. One of these positions comes under the anathema of Galatians 1:8-9: "But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we said before, so say I now again, If any *man* preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed."

(Anyone interested in a more lengthy treatment of Lordship salvation may want to consult Charles C. Ryrie's *So Great Salvation*. For a discussion of the various authors on both sides of the debate, see my paper, "Lordship Salvation: A Forgotten Truth or a False Doctrine?")

2. HIS DOUBLE TALK ON THE BLOOD OF CHRIST

MacArthur's discussion of the blood of Christ is confusing at best and misleading and heretical at worst. In his thinking, the physical blood of Christ is of no intrinsic value. It is simply a symbol of the death of Christ.

MacArthur spells this out on Tape #GC 80-44, entitled "The Blood of Christ—selected Scriptures." The sermon from which this quote is excerpted was preached in 1972.

There is no sense in getting teary-eyed and mystical about blood. We sing hymns about 'There is Power in the Blood,' and so forth, and we don't want to get preoccupied with blood. The only importance that the blood of Jesus has is that it shows He died. There is no saving in that blood itself. We cannot say that the very blood of Jesus—His physical blood—is what atones for sin. It is His death that atones for sin. His blood shed was an act of death. So, we do not want to become preoccupied about fantasizing about some mystical blood that is floating around somewhere. It is by the sacrificial offering of Himself--it is by His death--that we are redeemed. Blood shed is only the picture of His death....So, when Jesus died and shed his blood this is no big thing. This is nothing for Israel to get all bent out of shape about.

MacArthur's slighting of "the precious blood of Christ" (I Peter 1:18-19) prompts Lloyd Streeker to conclude that the above statements are "absolute heresy! . . . The words he speaks are poison to the souls of men! . . . MacArthur's big error in the above quoted statement is that he separates Christ's bleeding from His dying, and says that only Christ's death was the redemption price." (*The Baptist Arrow*, Vol. 2, No. 2, March 1993, p. 4).

Gospel According to the Apostles, persists in his error by entitling a section, "The Myth of the Carnal Christian." Under this heading, MacArthur writes the following:

Almost all no-lordship theology leans heavily on the notion that there are three classes of humanity: unsaved people, spiritual Christians, and carnal Christians. This was one of the planks in the no-lordship platform that was laid by Lewis Sperry Chafer. Chafer popularized the carnal-Christian idea in his 1918 book, *He That Is Spiritual* (pp. 124-125).

6. HIS DENIAL OF THE TWO NATURES OF THE BELIEVER

Following his Reformed mentors, MacArthur insists that at the moment of the new birth, the believer's old nature is abolished. Unlike Arminian theologians, he does not believe in sinless perfection. A believer still sins, but his sins are explained in terms of the vestiges of the old life, old habits which occasionally break into our life. MacArthur's denial of the old nature explains his disclaimer of the concept of the carnal Christian. Obviously, if the believer no longer battles an old nature, carnality is, in fact, an aspect of the believer's new nature.

In an article entitled "The Good-Natured Believer," MacArthur writes: "If you are a Christian, it's a serious misunderstanding to think of yourself of having both an old and new nature. We do not have a dual personality! Assuming the dual nature of the believer could easily lead one to excuse all kinds of sin by blaming them on the old nature" (*Masterpiece*, March/April 1990, p. 18).

In his more recent volume he writes:

...Christians sin because of the vestiges of sinful flesh, not because they have the same old active sinful nature. Certainly we sin, but when we sin it is contrary to our nature, not because we have two dispositions—one sinful and one not. . . . Sin has lost its dominating control over us. Obviously we all struggle with sinful propensities. Death to the sinful self does not mean death to the flesh and its corrupted inclinations. Because of the pleasures of sin and the weakness of our remaining flesh, we often yield to sin. (*Faith Works—The Gospel According to the Disciples*, pp. 116-117).

The believer's sins, it seems, are unfortunately more than vestiges of a former nature. The picture painted by Paul of the believer's struggle between the flesh and the spirit certainly suggest a daily struggle between the old and the new nature. (Galatians 5:17).

7. HIS DE-EMPHASIS OF POSITIONAL TRUTH

MacArthur displays a great deal of confusion in the matter of positional truth in the two areas of salvation and sanctification. He evidences a defective understanding of the believer's position and practice, his standing and his state. The glorious biblical truth of the Reformation, describing the Christian as *simul iustus et peccator* (at the same time justified and a sinner) seems to escape MacArthur.

MacArthur's basic thesis is that "every Christian is a disciple" (*The Gospel According to Jesus*, p. 196). Any distinction between believer and disciple is "purely artificial" (*Ibid.*, p. 196). And a call to Christian discipleship explicitly demands "total dedication. It is full commitment with nothing knowingly or deliberately held back" (*Ibid.*, p. 197).

Converted individuals such as the Corinthians are positionally perfect before God. They are "sanctified in Christ Jesus, called *to be saints*" (I Corinthians 1:2). And yet, their conduct was characterized by carnality. They had positional sanctification but lacked progressive sanctification. They had accepted Christ as Savior, but had not yet recognized him as Sovereign and Lord. Lordship is imperative for sanctification. It should not be confused with salvation, let alone be made a prerequisite of it. MacArthur's insistence that a new convert (position) give every evidence of dedication (practice) ignores the fact that many believers need some amount of spiritual growth before giving their all to the Savior, as seen in Paul's encouragement to the saints of Rome to present their bodies a living sacrifice (Romans 12:1-2). In the case of Abraham's nephew Lot, one would never suspect from the Old Testament that he was a believer. Only Peter informs us that Lot was righteous (II Peter 2:7-8). Lot had a righteous standing before God and yet lived an entire life of carnality. His practice never matched his position. Since in MacArthur's thinking an individual cannot be saved without recognizing Christ's lordship and is not plagued by an old nature after salvation, he must live more or less a Spirit-filled and dedicated life. Lot's unseparated and undedicated life to the contrary, MacArthur incredibly considers him an example of a spiritual believer. "Lot was certainly not 'carnal' in the sense that he lacked spiritual desires" (*Faith Works*, p. 128). A defective understanding of positional and practical truth leads to defective interpretation.

8. HIS DISCREPANCIES IN HIS PRESENTED MATERIALS

The dictionary defines discrepancy as inconsistency, disagreement. The verb *discrepant* is derived from the French, *dis + crepare*, to rattle, creak. Some things in MacArthur's writings creak, or don't sound right. MacArthur's publications are characterized by numerous internal inconsistencies which are apparent even to the casual reader. At one place, MacArthur makes one statement, at another place a

totally opposite statement. Time after time one comes across totally contradictory statements, sometimes in the same book or even the same chapter. The reader is prompted to ask, "Will the real MacArthur please stand up?" Both propositions cannot be right.

Will a believer demonstrate fruit or won't he?

Statement A:

"There is no such thing as a fruitless Christian... There is no such thing as a Christian who does not bear fruit" (*Freedom from Sin*, p. 89, 109).

Statement B:

"A believer can be just as barren and fruitless as an unbeliever. Even a barren and fruitless Christian will enter into the Kingdom" (*Adding to Your Faith*, p. 49)

Does the believer have one nature or two?

Statement A:

"Believers do not have dual personalities. . . There is no such thing as an old nature in the believer" (*Freedom from Sin*, p. 31).

Statement B:

Being a Christian doesn't make you perfect, but you do have the capacity not to sin. Sometimes our fallen nature tempts us to sin, and we give in" (*Ibid.*, p. 85).

Is there a difference between Israel and the Church, Law and Grace, or isn't there?

Statement A:

"I am a dispensationalist and am convinced that the dispensational distinction between the Church and Israel is an accurate understanding of God's eternal plan as revealed in Scripture" (*Faith Works*, p. 220-221).

Statement B:

"The age-of-law/age-of-grace division in particular has wreaked havoc on dispensational theology and contributed to confusion about the doctrine of salvation" (*The Gospel According to Jesus*, p. 25)

Is a believer totally yielded and sanctified or can he resist the Lordship of Christ and live in sin?

Statement A:

"Thus salvation cannot be defective in any dimension. As a part of His saving work, God will produce repentance, faith, sanctification, yieldedness, obedience, and ultimately glorification. Since He is not dependent on human effort in producing those elements, and experience that lacks any of them cannot be the saving work of God" (*The Gospel According to Jesus*, p. 33).

Statement B:

"Once they have come to Him, some Christians lose their first love for Him as Savior and resist obeying Him as Lord. But their lovelessness makes Him no less Savior, and their resistance makes Him no less Lord" (*Ephesians*, p. 39).

Further:

"After salvation, sin no longer resides in the innermost self, which is recreated like Christ. Yet it finds its residuals dwelling in our flesh. That's why Paul said nothing good dwelt in his flesh (v 18)" ("The Good-Natured Believer," *Masterpiece*, March/April 1990, p. 20).

Further:

"You are not less evil now than you used to be. In your unredeemed mortality and humanness you are evil" (Tape GC 45-52, Romans 7).

Further:

"Sin is still present in our humanness, which includes the mind, emotions, and body" (*Freedom from Sin*, p. 173)

9. HIS DOCTRINE OF ELDER RULE

The church is a unique institution for this dispensation. The local church is designated by the Lord to carry on the work of evangelism and edification. The New Testament contains detailed instructions for the church, including its organization, officers, and ordinances. MacArthur differs in several aspects from Baptists in the area of ecclesiology. He insists that Baptists are unbiblical in their concept of congregational rule. In his thinking, the final authority of the local church is not the congregation but the board of elders.

MacArthur forcefully argues for elder rule in his booklet, *Answering the Key Questions About Elders*. He insists that:

The biblical norm for church leadership is a plurality of God-ordained elders. Furthermore, it is the only pattern for church leadership given in the New Testament. Nowhere in Scripture do we find a local assembly ruled by majority opinion, or by one pastor (p. 1).

Elders are called and appointed by God, confirmed by the church leadership and ordained to the task of leadership. . . Nothing in Scripture indicates that anyone at a lower level of leadership should be involved in decision making as it relates to church policy or doctrine (p. 31).

Baptists maintain that a close examination of the biblical data will bear out the concept of congregational rule. In Matthew 18, the final court of adjudication in a local church matter is not the board of elders but the congregation. "And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell *it* unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican" (18:17). In matters of church discipline, the final say is not given to the elders but to the congregation. "In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, To deliver such an one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. Your glorying *is* not good. Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump? Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us." (1 Corinthians 5:4-7)

10. HIS DESIGNS AGAINST THE BAPTIST CHURCHES

MacArthur's ecclesiology is at variance with Baptist doctrine in the area of who heads the flock and who has the final authority. Baptists traditionally have maintained that each congregation need only have one pastor/bishop/elder. They further defend the concept of congregational rule.

MacArthur espouses the plurality of elders view and the elders as the final authority in the church. He is not content to live and let live. In his Shepherds' Conferences, he instructs pastors how to undermine Baptist churches and other churches with a congregational form of government and change them into plurality of elders and *eldership-rule* churches. On one of the tapes from the Shepherds' Conferences to which I listened, MacArthur was asked by a pastor how he should go about starting elder-rule type churches. MacArthur's response was that rather than starting new churches it was better to take existing churches with congregational rule and convert them to elder rule. This writer has spoken with several pastors who were so enamored with MacArthur's position that they completely changed their churches to non-Baptist eldership-rule congregations.

In an article entitled, "Honesty in the Ministry," by Frank Bumpus in *Frontline* (Vol. 6, No. 1, p. 18), an audio tape from one of the Shepherd's Conferences is quoted. The speaker relates the following conversation:

I had a guy call me from the inter-city in Los Angeles, and he said, 'Dr. Barsaw, we are going to change to "elder rule."'

I said, "Great. What are you going to do?"

He said, 'We are rewriting our constitution and our bylaws.'

I said, 'What are you going to do when they are rewritten?'

He said, 'We are going to bring them to the congregation, and they are going to pass this new constitution and these new bylaws.'

I said, 'Sure they are.'

He said, 'Do you have any advice?'

I said, 'Yeah, I have some great advice for you.'

He said, 'What is that?'

'Tear it [the constitution and bylaws] up—tear it up! When you [church] start functioning, then you can worry about rewriting. That is what we had to do at Grace...We first built a credible group of elders that no one minded following, and they [congregation] had been so used to following them [elders] that, when they came in with a change, they [congregation] said, 'Sure. If they say it, it must be true.' 'Credibility' is the key word in this whole thing. (*How to Go from Congregational to Elder-Rule.*)

Bumpus registers his total objection to the above practice: "I disagree. The 'key word' is 'dishonesty,' not 'credibility.' The speaker is telling those pastors not to be honest and straightforward with their churches, but to hide their objective until they have gained the confidence of the people in order to set the stage for a takeover. This speaker is saying that if you are open and honest about your intention, it won't work. Listen to his next comment: 'All right, so pitfall number one is, "Don't try to rewrite it before you do it. Do it and then worry about rewriting it."'

Bumpus quotes from yet another audiotape which relates a query directed to John MacArthur from a man in the audience:

As churches go from congregational to elder rule, a lot of times there is a fear in the hearts of the congregation that they are losing their voice and their say in the decision and direction of the church. What place, then, does the congregation have in the direction or decision-making in the church? [Dr. MacArthur answers] 'Well, it's a justified fear because that is, in fact, what's happening' (*Questions and Answers*). (*Frontline, Ibid.*)

When MacArthur took over the leadership of the Los Angeles Baptist College, a school built with money from fundamental Regular Baptists, apparently by his insistence, the name Baptist was dropped immediately. No one disputes MacArthur's prerogative to preach and practice what he pleases, but one wonders

why Baptist churches, schools and state fellowships are so enamored with one who espouses so many doctrinal aberrations and has a well-known antipathy toward Baptist distinctives.

11. HIS DIATRIBES AGAINST THE DISPENSATIONALISTS

It has already been noted under point 5 that MacArthur accuses dispensationalists of inventing the category of carnal Christian. MacArthur claims to be a dispensationalist, yet in a strange twist of logic, he berates the dispensationalists for believing what makes them dispensationalists: that the church is not Israel, that the Law is not Grace, and that the Old Testament is not New Testament truth. His cavalier treatment of dispensationalists such as Chafer, Walvoord, Ryrie, and Hodges has endeared him to leading covenant theologians who commend his theology warmly on the dust jackets of his books. His Reformed position on salvation and sanctification as well as his nondispensational exposition of the Sermon on the Mount set him at odds with dispensational distinctives and raise all sorts of questions about his claim to belong to the dispensational camp.

MacArthur defines dispensationalism as "A system of biblical interpretation that sees a distinction between God's program for Israel and His dealings with the church" (*Faith Works*, p. 219).

And yet, MacArthur accuses dispensationalists of extreme exegesis for making distinctions between Law and Grace and Israel and the Church:

There is a tendency, however, for dispensationalists to get carried away with compartmentalizing truth to the point that they can make unbiblical distinctions. An almost obsessive desire to categorize everything neatly has led various dispensational interpreters to draw hard lines not only between the church and Israel, but also between salvation and discipleship, the church and the kingdom, Christ's preaching and the apostolic message, faith and repentance, and the age of law and the age of grace. The age of law and the age of grace division in particular have wreaked havoc on dispensational theology and contributed to confusion about the doctrine of salvation (*The Gospel According to Jesus*, p. 25).

It is a mistake of the worst sort to set the teachings of Paul and the apostles over against the words of our Lord and imagine that they contradict one another or speak of different dispensations (*Ibid.*, p. 214)

I decried the methodology of dispensationalists who want to isolate salvation from repentance, justification from sanctification, faith from

works, and Christ's Lordship from His role as Savior, in a way that breaks asunder what God has joined together" (*Ibid.*, p. 221).

In *Faith Works*, MacArthur continues his denunciation of dispensationalism as taught by Chafer and Ryrie. First, he observes that Ryrie and he are "in essential agreement on the distinction of Israel and the Church and literal hermeneutics" (*Faith Works*, p. 221). Then he says his purpose is "to plead for a purer, more biblical application of the literal, historical, grammatical principle of interpretation" (*Ibid.*) But when dispensationalists practice literal, historical, and grammatical hermeneutics, MacArthur calls it a "rigid partitioning of 'the age of law' and 'the age of grace,'" such as when Chafer notes that "the teachings of the law, the teaching of grace and the teachings of the Kingdom are separate and complete systems of divine rule" (*Ibid.*, pp. 229-230).

MacArthur deplors these distinctions as "rigid forms of extreme dispensationalism" (*Ibid.*, p. 232) which teach that the Mosaic law has ended. Chafer's system, with its "grace teachings. . . pave the way for a brand of Christianity that has legitimized careless and carnal behavior" (*Ibid.*, p. 228).

MacArthur concludes with a word of warning. "Dispensationalism is at a crossroads. The lordship controversy represents a signpost where the road forks. One arrow marks the road of biblical orthodoxy. The other arrow, labeled 'no-lordship,' points the way to a sub-Christian antinomianism" (*Ibid.*, p. 233).

There you have it. The system of dispensationalism championed by Chafer and Ryrie leads to careless and carnal behavior as well as to a sub-Christian antinomianism!

12. HIS DISTORTIONS OF HIS OPPONENTS' VIEWS

In scholarly debate, whether oral or written, it is always important to represent one's opponent's views correctly and quote him accurately. One deplorable feature of MacArthur's writings is that he does not represent his opponent's positions accurately. In quoting others he adds a word here, changes a phrase there, thus altering the original meaning of the quote. This is unscholarly and unethical, but in this fashion he constructs straw men which he then proceeds to dismantle, never mind what the author's actual position is.

One of MacArthur's main criticisms of dispensationalists is that they have created easy-believism which has ruined the purity of the church. To support his point, MacArthur quotes Lewis Sperry Chafer as saying that grace is "the Christian's liberty

to do precisely as he chooses" (*The Gospel According to Jesus*, p. 31) What MacArthur omits is that in the same paragraph Chafer also said, "but God has provided a sufficient safeguard which consists in the fact that the divine ideal is first wrought in the heart: 'for it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his own good pleasure'" (*Grace*, p. 345).

In *Faith Works*, MacArthur contrasts the Lordship and free grace positions (pp. 26-27). He especially quotes Ryrie's book *So Great Salvation*, but unfortunately alters numerous quotes by Ryrie in a most unfair, un scholarly, and unethical manner.

MacArthur quoting Ryrie: "Saving faith is simply being convinced or giving credence to the truth of the gospel (SGS 156)."

Ryrie's actual statement: "*Faith*. Being convinced or giving credence. . ." MacArthur adds the word *simply*.

MacArthur quoting Ryrie: "Christians can even lapse into a state of permanent spiritual barrenness (SGS 53-54)."

Ryrie's actual statement: "Christians may even slide back to a fruitless condition for some period of time."

MacArthur changes "some period of time" to "permanent," thus totally twisting the meaning.

MacArthur quotes Ryrie: "disobedience and prolonged sin are no reason to doubt the reality of one's faith (SGS 48)."

Ryrie neither says this nor believes this. It must be very exasperating for scholars like Ryrie and Hodges not simply to be misunderstood but to have one's words misquoted. Whatever happened to Christian scholarly integrity?

13. HIS DEFECTS IN HERMENEUTICS

No one disputes the fact that John MacArthur is one of America's foremost Bible teachers. His radio messages, tapes and books have blessed millions around the world. A careful examination of his exegesis of Bible passages and terms shows that when he teaches in controversial areas, he falls prey to a temptation that we all must resist: —to make the passage or term say what he wants it to say—not what it actually says—or to simply ignore passages which appear to support his opponents' views. For example, because of his Lordship salvation stand, in which he makes Lordship a prerequisite of salvation, he needs to give a new and unbiblical meaning to such terms as "faith," "believe," and "repentance." After all, Acts 16:31 says nothing about Lordship or dedication. Salvation is simply based on faith: "And they

said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house" (Acts 16:31). Since in MacArthur's thinking this cannot be, he expands the definition of faith (*pistis*) beyond the meaning of confidence and trust to commitment and yielding. "Repentance" (*metanoia*), which is biblically a change of mind, becomes a term of surrender and complete yieldedness. The significant title of "Lord" is, especially in soteriological passages, a reference to Jesus not as Master but as Yahweh. It is a designation of deity. The Jews of Romans 10:9-10 had difficulty recognizing Jesus as Yahweh, the eternal creator God.

Besides changing the meaning of terms, MacArthur twists Scriptures for support of his position that saving faith involves not simply trust but dedication. One illustration must suffice. The account in Numbers 21:7, as quoted by Christ in John 3, relates to the brazen serpent. MacArthur writes as follows:

In order to look at the bronze snake on the pole, they had to *drag themselves* to where they could see it. They were in no position to *glance flippantly* at the pole and then *proceed with lives of rebellion* (*The Gospel According to Jesus*, p. 46; italics added).

Hodges, who comments on MacArthur's exposition, rightly observes. "Most readers will rightly regard these comments as totally without support from the biblical text in Numbers. MacArthur is guilty of distorting the obvious simplicity of our Lord's illustration about saving faith" (*Absolutely Free!*, p. 212).

14. HIS DILEMMA IN RELATION TO THE IFCA

The fellowship of the Independent Fundamental Churches of America (IFCA) has a very clear doctrinal statement. Twice the eternal Sonship of Christ is mentioned, and the wording is precise and unmistakable. This should pose a dilemma for John MacArthur, who for years has been associated with the IFCA. MacArthur equally clearly and consistently denies the eternal Sonship. He wants to remain a part of the IFCA, but his position is diametrically opposed to that of the IFCA. What to do? He signed the IFCA's doctrinal statement anyway. How can one ethically sign a doctrinal statement which is clearly and diametrically opposed to one's stated position?

The IFCA Doctrinal Statement clearly speaks to the issue of the eternal Sonship of our Lord Jesus Christ: 'WE BELIEVE IN ONE TRIUNE GOD, ETERNALLY EXISTING IN THREE PERSONS--FATHER, SON, AND HOLY SPIRIT' [Article IV; Section 1 (2)]; 'WE BELIEVE THAT THE LORD JESUS CHRIST, THE ETERNAL SON OF GOD, BECAME MAN, WITHOUT CEASING TO BE GOD' [Article IV; Section 1 (3a)].

ARTICLE IV FAITH AND DOCTRINE

16

Section I. Articles of Biblical Faith

Each and every person, church, or organization, in order to become or remain a member of the Independent Fundamental Churches of America (IFCA), shall be required to subscribe to the following articles of faith:

(1) The Holy Scriptures

We believe the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the verbally inspired Word of God, the final authority for faith and life, inerrant in the original writings, infallible and God-breathed (2 Timothy 3:16,17; 2 Peter 1:20,21; Matthew 5:18; John 16:12,13)

(2) The Godhead

We believe in one Triune God, eternally existing in three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—co-eternal in being, co-identical in nature, co-equal in power and glory, and having the same attributes and perfections (Deuteronomy 6:4; 2 Corinthians 13:14).

(3) The Person and Work of Christ

a. We believe that the Lord Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, became man, without ceasing to be God, having been conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary, in order that he might reveal God and redeem sinful men (John 1:1,2,14, Luke 1:35).

As already quoted, MacArthur denies the eternal Sonship of Christ. His position is very clear: "The Bible nowhere speaks of the eternal Sonship of Christ.... Christ was not Son until His incarnation.... His Sonship began in a point of time, not in eternity.... He is no 'eternal son'" (*Hebrews*, pp. 27-28).

In light of this contradiction between what MacArthur teaches and the IFCA's official position, five IFCA Regionals on the east coast adopted in 1991 "A Statement of Doctrinal Integrity." This urgent appeal is addressed to the IFCA National Executive Committee which feels that MacArthur's divergent view falls within the area of "interpretive freedom." In a strongly worded-statement the IFCA pastors and churches state:

We are obligated to hold firmly to our Doctrinal Statement which declares that Jesus Christ is 'the eternal Son of God.' We cannot and must not accommodate, tolerate or allow for contrary positions. Any member of the IFCA who denies the eternal Sonship of Christ is out of harmony with our doctrinal position and he must be denied membership in our Fellowship. Renewal of membership must be denied to any who do not express wholehearted concurrence with our doctrinal position regarding Sonship or any other issue.

Rev. George Zeller of Middletown Bible Church in Middletown, Connecticut, rightly concludes:

In light of this a fair question would be this: How could John MacArthur sign the IFCA doctrinal statement and be in hearty agreement with it when it clearly states that Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of God? Such an affirmation is in clear conflict with MacArthur's published statements found in five of his commentaries (not to mention his public tapes, official position papers, etc.). ("The Teachings of John MacArthur, Jr.", p. 11; emphasis in the original).

Was it ethical for John MacArthur to sign the IFCA doctrinal statement? Is it proper for the IFCA to permit in its membership individuals who deviate decisively from its doctrinal statement? It is no wonder that because of this ethical dilemma a number of IFCA churches left the fellowship.

Besides clearly affirming the eternal Sonship of Christ, the IFCA doctrinal statement likewise recognizes that the believer has two natures, an old nature and a new nature: "We believe that every saved person possesses two natures, with provision made for victory of the new nature over the old nature through the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit, and, that all claims to the eradication of the old nature in this life are unscriptural" (Section 1, Article 8).

How could MacArthur sign the statement when his teachings flatly contradict the official IFCA position? MacArthur writes, "I believe it is a serious misunderstanding to think of the believer as having both an old and new nature. Believers do not have dual personalities. There is no such thing as an old nature in the believer" (*Freedom from Sin*, p. 31-32).

Let us come back once more to the question that was raised in the introduction to this paper. How many doctrinal errors or ethical expediencies should one tolerate? It depends how highly one values the doctrine of salvation and the Sonship of Christ. It depends on one's convictions concerning the biblical distinctives of Baptists and the importance of sanctification. Do we have a right to mark those who cause divisions among us and avoid their error? Biblically, we have both the right and the responsibility (Romans 16:17-18). While we would not deny others the freedom to speak even in error, we have the responsibility to speak the truth, but to speak it in love. We must always be mindful as ministers of the Word that those of us who teach the Word of God have a great responsibility because of our future accountability (James 3:1)

When others bring confusion to the faithful, it is not wrong to contend earnestly for the faith. When salvation by faith alone and the Sonship of Christ are denied, it is cowardly not to contend for the truth and to combat unbiblical compromise with error

John MacArthur and Lloyd-Jones' Studies in the Sermon on the Mount

On this episode of *Open Book*, Stephen Nichols and John MacArthur discuss the Sermon on the Mount, misinterpreted parables, and a pastor known as "the Doctor."

Transcript [*Transcript lightly edited for readability.*]

STEPHEN NICHOLS: It's good to see you again, Dr. MacArthur.

JOHN MACARTHUR: Thank you, Stephen.

NICHOLS: We're still talking about books that have influenced you, and we had talked about one London pastor already with John Stott. Now we're going to talk about another. He's known as "the Doctor," and he's Welsh. We're talking about none other than D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones.

MACARTHUR: Of course I knew about him, and I had read some of his writings, but I was starting the book of Matthew at Grace Community Church. It was probably the most definitive book I taught in the history of my pastoral ministry.

NICHOLS: May I just ask you a question at this point? Were you planning at that point to preach through the New Testament, or did you just start with Matthew?

MACARTHUR: Yes, I wanted to preach through the New Testament from the get-go.

NICHOLS: Okay.

MACARTHUR: I didn't know if I'd do it. I mean, who stays in one place long enough to do that, at the pace that I do it? Criswell did it because he took chapters, but—

NICHOLS: You do verses.

MACARTHUR: — I do verses, yes. Phrases.

NICHOLS: Phrase by phrase.

The ugly head of dispensationalism???

MACARTHUR: But I came to the book of Matthew, and I was fine until I got to chapter 5, and I got to the Sermon on the Mount, and all my dispensational background reared its ugly head. I had read a couple of commentaries by guys at Dallas Seminary, like Walvoord and others, and I said, "I do not believe this. I do not believe that the Sermon on the Mount has no relevance to the living church, and it's some kind of a formula for living in the millennium in the future." And I said, "I need help. I need help to understand this, and I need help, not on some kind of big picture. I need help with the details of this."

NICHOLS: The details, yes. The fine print.

MACARTHUR: So, I got a copy of Martyn Lloyd-Jones [*Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* – [link](#)]. In the process of going through that, I jettisoned virtually all of that sort of dispensational stuff that had been concocted and imposed on the book of Matthew and on the rest of Scripture. It all died in the encounter that I had with [Matthew 5](#) through 7.

MACARTHUR: Then once that became clear, by the time I got to the parables, I understood those correctly for the first time because they were all misinterpreted as well.

NICHOLS: And discipleship.

MACARTHUR: Well, yes.

NICHOLS: Jesus was going to come to demonstrate.

MACARTHUR: And the whole Lordship issue came roaring out of that. But yes, I devoured the *Sermon on the Mount*. I read it and reread it and scribbled it. I marked it up extensively because I was going through a metamorphosis in my mind. It was changing me, so I was having to let go of things and see things in a different way. Some of those bolts were already loose, but they completely came undone. Some of the dispensational bolts came undone under the influence of Martyn Lloyd-Jones.

NICHOLS: I just picture you right now like a submarine— bolts popping and the water flooding in.