

Is Belief in Christ's Lordship Essential?

Exposition of the Doctrinal Dispute

The "Free Grace" View

The "Lordship Salvation" View

Analysis of the Issues

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The most important and most precious Christian beliefs can become the subject of disagreement and debate. At various times in the history of the church different doctrines have come in for extensive and definitive discussion. In the fourth and fifth centuries it was the Trinity and the person of Christ; in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the atonement; in the sixteenth century, the nature of justification and the doctrine of the church; in the early and middle twentieth century, the doctrine of revelation. In the past decade, the lordship of Christ has been increasingly debated by evangelical theologians. This debate has far-reaching implications for our perspectives on regeneration, assurance of salvation, and sanctification.

I have sometimes wondered, when studying the theological controversies surrounding the ecumenical councils of the fourth and fifth centuries, just how those disputes arose, and what were the dynamics of the interaction between the adherents of opposing viewpoints. The current debate over the role of the lordship of Christ may give us some

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clues. The “free grace” school of thought, represented especially by Zane Hodges, former professor of New Testament at Dallas Theological Seminary, and the “lordship salvation” view, advocated principally by John MacArthur, pastor-teacher of Grace Community Church of Sun Valley, California, have for several years engaged in debate in print.¹ Whereas in the early Middle Ages such disputes were solved by convening an ecumenical council, twentieth-century Protestants instead conduct their debate in print, allowing the reading public to arrive at their conclusions.

Since several Dallas Seminary faculty and alumni have entered the discussion on Hodges’s side, and since MacArthur is a graduate of Talbot School of Theology, one might think this to be merely an internal dispute among theologians in the dispensational tradition. It is more than that, however. The issues involved here are of immense importance. At stake is our understanding of the nature of salvation, including the nature of saving faith. This in turn has significant ramifications for evangelism and for our understanding of the Christian life.

We will begin by outlining Hodges’s view as found in his *Gospel Under Siege* and in his response to MacArthur, *Absolutely Free*. An outline of MacArthur’s thought as found in his *Gospel According to Jesus* will follow. We will then seek to determine the exact issues dividing the two positions and submit those issues to logical analysis. We will conclude with a few suggestions for advancing the discussion.

Exposition of the Doctrinal Dispute

Before presenting the two positions, let us take a moment to note how each side views the other, and what they feel is at stake. To those who emphasize free grace, the issue is the purity of grace. In their understanding, lordship salvation mixes a requirement of works with faith, thus perverting the pure grace of the gospel. In the view of those who hold to lordship salvation, the advocates of free grace are guilty of cheapening the gospel, so that what they offer is not merely free grace, it is cheap grace. It is not difficult to see why each side sees the debate as crucial, and views the teaching of the other with alarm. They believe the very nature of the gospel to be at stake. In addition, both sides feel that Scripture, as well as the historic belief and practice of the church, clearly favors their own view.

I have often pointed out to students the importance of noting what the parties in a dispute say about their own view. Frequently the two

1. It should be noted that MacArthur and others who share his view reject the label of “lordship theology”; see John F. MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), pp. 28–29 n. 20.

, represented especially by MacArthur at Dallas Theological Seminary, advocated principally by the Community Church of Sun Prairie, engaged in debate in print.¹ These issues were solved by convening the two groups of Protestants instead of sending the matter to a public hearing to arrive at their

and MacArthur have entered the debate. MacArthur is a graduate of Talbot Theological Seminary, and his view is to be merely an internal matter of the traditional tradition. It is more important to note that these issues are of immense importance of salvation, including significant ramifications for the Christian life.

MacArthur as found in his *Gospel Under Siege*, *Absolutely Free*. An outline of the issues dividing the two sides is given in the analysis. We will conclude with a discussion.

Introduction

Let us take a moment to note how important the issue is at stake. To those who believe in the necessity of works with faith, the issue is clear. In the view of those who believe in free grace are guilty of error. The issue is not merely free grace, but the necessity of works. By each side sees the debate as a matter of the church with alarm. They believe in the necessity of works. In addition, both sides feel the importance of the practice of the church,

The importance of noting what is at stake in the debate. Frequently the two sides

who share his view reject the label of *Gospel According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989).

sides' statements of their own view will be very similar to one another, whereas their characterizations of the opposing view will be sharply different. A legalist views a middle-of-the-road position as antinomianism and therefore treats it as if it were more extreme than it is. Similarly, an antinomian looking at a moderate position believes he sees legalism, and ascribes to it all the characteristics thereof. We will need to sift carefully through the charges and countercharges, and then find our own interpretation.

The "Free Grace" View

An abundance of writings sets forth the position of totally free grace, as its adherents like to label it. Most prominent are the several writings of Hodges.² Charles Ryrie took a similar stance as early as 1969.³ Michael Cocoris has contributed to the literature.⁴ Bob Wilkin and the Grace Evangelical Society are major advocates of free grace.⁵ Several major doctrinal motifs run through all of their writings:

1. *The simplicity of faith.* Faith is the one and only condition requisite for receiving eternal life. This truth is seen in the simple declarations of what salvation involves. John 5:24 says, "He who hears . . . and believes . . . has everlasting life" (NKJV).⁶ The words of Paul to the Philippian jailor were similarly uncomplicated: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31 NKJV).⁷ There is no mention of repentance, of good works, of commitment to lordship. It is faith, and faith alone. As Hodges comments regarding Jesus' specification for the Samaritan woman:

Its very lack of complication is part of its grandeur. It is all a matter of giving and receiving and no other conditions are attached. . . . It must be emphasized that there is no call here for surrender, submission, acknowledgement of Christ's Lordship, or anything else of this kind. A gift is being offered to one totally unworthy of God's favor. And to get it, the woman is required to make no spiritual commitment whatsoever. She

2. Zane C. Hodges, *The Hungry Inherit* (Chicago: Moody, 1972); idem, *The Gospel Under Siege* (Dallas: Redencion Viva, 1981); idem, "I John," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, ed. John Walvoord and Roy Zuck (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1983); idem, *Grace in Eclipse* (Dallas: Redencion Viva, 1985); idem, *Absolutely Free* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989).

3. Charles C. Ryrie, *Balancing the Christian Life* (Chicago: Moody, 1969).

4. G. Michael Cocoris, *Lordship Salvation—Is It Biblical?* (Dallas: Redencion Viva, 1983); idem, *Evangelism: A Biblical Approach* (Chicago: Moody, 1984).

5. Bob Wilkin, review of *The Gospel According to Jesus* by John F. MacArthur, *Grace Evangelical Society News* 3 (Oct.–Nov. 1988): 1–2; idem, "Current Issues in Salvific Repentance" (Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, San Diego, 17 Nov. 1989).

6. Hodges, *Gospel Under Siege*, p. 10.

7. Ibid., p. 13.

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is merely invited to ask. It is precisely this impressive fact that distinguishes the true Gospel from all its counterfeits.⁸

This faith is a matter of believing divinely revealed facts.⁹ It is appropriation.¹⁰ Citing 1 John 5:1, Hodges says, "Everyone who believes is born of God. . . . *There are no exceptions at all.*"¹¹ Distinctions between false faith and genuine faith are inappropriate on two counts. First, they violate common sense. In other areas of human experience we do not talk about false faith.¹² Second, they are contrary to biblical teaching. The Bible knows nothing of an intellectual assent that is not genuine salvation. It instead contrasts faith and unbelief, not true and false faith.¹³

2. *The dispensability of repentance to saving faith.* Perhaps the major point of the emphasis upon the simplicity of faith is that it neither requires nor involves repentance. Repentance is not found in Acts 16:31, nor are repentance and surrender implied in the word *believe*.¹⁴ Repentance is essential to fellowship with God, but not to salvation. Hodges's position is clear: "Though genuine repentance *may* precede salvation . . . , it *need not* do so. And because it is not essential to the saving transaction as such, it is in no sense a condition for that transaction. But the fact still remains that God demands repentance from all and He conditions their *fellowship with Him* on that."¹⁵ Hodges thinks it especially significant that John, who was especially concerned to bring his readers to saving knowledge of Christ (John 20:31), makes no mention of repentance as a condition for salvation. Indeed, Hodges goes as far as to say that John *avoids* the doctrine of repentance.¹⁶ Insisting that one must not only believe but also repent is adding to the gospel of pure grace, complicating and perverting that truth.

3. *Separation of the saviorhood and the lordship of Christ.* The school of free grace makes explicit what has been implicit in the preceding two points. To be saved, one needs only to believe in and trust Jesus as Savior. Commitment to Jesus as Lord is not an additional condition for salvation.

Separation of saviorhood and lordship may seem difficult to sustain in light of the references to Jesus as Lord in connection with prescrip-

8. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

9. Hodges, *Absolutely Free*, p. 39.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 27-28.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 144-45.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 146.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 147.

impressive fact that distinguishes it.⁸

revealed facts.⁹ It is appropriate to say "Everyone who believes is *all*."¹¹ Distinctions between the two counts. First, they are contrary to biblical teaching. Second, they are contrary to human experience we do not deny. Third, they are contrary to biblical teaching. Fourth, they are contrary to biblical teaching. Fifth, they are contrary to biblical teaching. Sixth, they are contrary to biblical teaching. Seventh, they are contrary to biblical teaching. Eighth, they are contrary to biblical teaching. Ninth, they are contrary to biblical teaching. Tenth, they are contrary to biblical teaching. Eleventh, they are contrary to biblical teaching. Twelfth, they are contrary to biblical teaching. Thirteenth, they are contrary to biblical teaching. Fourteenth, they are contrary to biblical teaching. Fifteenth, they are contrary to biblical teaching. Sixteenth, they are contrary to biblical teaching. Seventeenth, they are contrary to biblical teaching. 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ing faith. Perhaps the major objection to the saving faith is that it is not found in Acts 16:31, but in the word *believe*.¹⁴ Repentance is not to salvation. Hodges's statement that repentance may precede salvation is not essential to the saving faith. But the Bible is clear that repentance from all and He commands us to believe. Hodges thinks it especially concerned to bring his readers to see that repentance is not essential to the saving faith. Hodges goes as far as to say that repentance is not essential to the saving faith.¹⁶ Insisting that one must repent to believe in and trust Jesus is not an additional condition to the gospel of pure grace.

the lordship of Christ. The Bible has been implicit in the preceding. To believe in and trust Jesus is not an additional condition to the gospel of pure grace.

may seem difficult to sustain a connection with prescrip-

tions for salvation. Notable examples are Acts 16:31 and Romans 10:9-10. Seemingly, salvation requires a commitment to obedience, since the word *Lord* means "one having the right to command." Basically the answer given by the advocates of free grace is that the term *Lord* is misunderstood if taken in this fashion. While the word can and does indeed mean "master" in some New Testament usages, it has many other meanings, including "God" (Acts 3:22), "owner" (Luke 19:33), "sir" (John 4:11), "idol" (1 Cor. 8:5), and even "husband" (1 Pet. 3:6).¹⁷ The references to Jesus as Lord should be understood as references to his deity.¹⁸ Thus commitment to Christ's lordship in the sense of obedience to him is not part of the initial experience of salvation.

4. *The permanence of regeneration.* There is a strong emphasis upon the absolute and irreversible character of the change wrought in a believer by regeneration. There is a permanence to the act of saving faith. Hodges says, "The water of life is received *once* and it is possessed *forever*. It is a forever gift!"¹⁹ A transforming work that cannot be lost is accomplished in the individual. Even if one desired to give back the regeneration once received, it cannot be nullified. Hodges's statement here is a strong one: "Nor is there anything I can do about regeneration once I have received it. By that astonishing miracle I am constituted a child of God. Even if I were to decide I did not want to be His child, it would do me no good. My spiritual birth, like my physical one, is irreversible."²⁰ Once we have become new creatures, once we have been born again, there is nothing that can be done to change that fact. It is permanent and irrevocable.

5. *Distinction between salvation and discipleship.* In many ways the basic concept is the distinction between salvation and discipleship. This thought recurs frequently in the writings of the advocates of free grace. Hodges says, for example, "But no one can understand the New Testament who does not see the obvious difference between the gift of life and being a pupil of Jesus Christ."²¹ This distinction is essential to correct interpretation. In other words, it is a hermeneutical (as well as a theological) principle of great significance.

In making this distinction, the school of free grace is not saying that discipleship is not important, nor that it should not be preached. Rather, discipleship is not a condition for salvation and should therefore not be included in evangelistic preaching. Lewis Sperry Chafer

17. Ryrie, *Balancing the Christian Life*, p. 173.

18. *Ibid.*, pp. 174-76; Livingston Blauvelt, Jr., "Does the Bible Teach Lordship Salvation?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 143 (Jan.-March 1986): 38-41.

19. Hodges, *Absolutely Free*, p. 57.

20. *Ibid.*

21. *Ibid.*, p. 68.

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wrote, "Next to sound doctrine itself, no more important obligation rests on the preacher than that of preaching the lordship of Christ to Christians exclusively, and the saviorhood of Christ to those who are unsaved."²² Livingston Blauvelt goes as far as to affirm that if we must acknowledge Christ's lordship, no one can ever be saved, since humans in their natural state are incapable of any good works.²³ (Apparently this spiritual blindness or total depravity does not prevent one from taking whatever steps are involved in believing or exercising saving faith, however.) "To require from the unsaved," says Blauvelt, "a dedication to [Christ's] lordship for their salvation is to make imperative what is only voluntary for believers (Rom. 12:1; 1 Pet. 3:15)."²⁴

6. *The nonessentiality of works.* The advocates of free grace insist that we exercise great care in understanding the nature, status, and value of works. For the confusion of works with faith, or the requirement of works for salvation, is a perversion of grace and of the very heart of the gospel. One is not required to perform good works in order to be saved. That should be obvious. Hodges insists, "There are no other conditions. There are no hidden clauses or commitments."²⁵ Not faith and works, but faith alone, is the basis of salvation.

Subtler than the obvious heresy of requiring good works for salvation is the view that truly regenerate persons, because they are regenerate, will certainly perform good works. According to this view, one who claims to be a Christian but does not perform good works either has forfeited eternal life or never possessed it in the first place. Hodges firmly rejects both of these conclusions, saying of James's statement that faith without works is dead (James 2:17), "Whatever James is saying . . . it can be neither of these ideas."²⁶

Hodges acknowledges that James "plainly makes works a *condition* for salvation."²⁷ This should not be understood as a reference to spiritual salvation, however. Rather, it is to be understood first in light of 2:14, where James denies the ability of faith to save one, which in turn must be understood in the light of 1:21-22, where we are told that doing the word can save one's soul. We have naturally tended to understand the reference to saving one's soul as salvation from hell and damnation. But since one of the consequences of sin is death (1:15), the reference is actually to saving one's life in the physical sense. Hodges says, "It is

22. Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols. (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947-1948), vol. 3, p. 387.

23. Blauvelt, "Does the Bible Teach Lordship Salvation?" p. 38.

24. *Ibid.*

25. Hodges, *Absolutely Free*, p. 202.

26. Hodges, *Gospel Under Siege*, p. 19.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

more important obligation rests on the lordship of Christ to Christ. Christ to those who are unwilling as to affirm that if we must never be saved, since humans do only good works.²³ (Apparently does not prevent one from taking or exercising saving faith," says Blauvelt, "a dedication is to make imperative what is Pet. 3:15)."²⁴

Advocates of free grace insist that the nature, status, and value of faith, or the requirement of obedience and of the very heart of the good works in order to be saved. There are no other conditions. "Not faith and works,

requiring good works for salvation because they are regenerate, according to this view, one who requires good works either has forfeited the first place. Hodges firmly affirms James's statement that faith never James is saying . . . it can

only makes works a *condition* understood as a reference to spiritual regeneration understood first in light of the need to save one, which in turn is where we are told that doing good works is naturally tended to understand the need to be saved from hell and damnation. In the light of the death (1:15), the reference is to spiritual sense. Hodges says, "It is

works. (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press,

salvation?" p. 38.

easy to see how obedience to the Word of God can 'save the life' from the death-dealing outcome of sin."²⁸

Lordship salvation, by contrast, makes works the basis for assurance of spiritual salvation. The presence of works is believed to be an evidence of the new birth. First John is understood as pointing out those works that are indices of the Christian life. Hodges argues that such a view has a very unfortunate result: "If good works are really a condition, or an essential fruit, of salvation, the answer to this question [Can I be sure of salvation?] must be: No. At least it must be 'no' until the hour of one's death. For only then will it be seen—if it can even be seen then!—whether the extent of my works as well as my perseverance in them are adequate to justify the conviction that I am saved."²⁹ Whether good works are regarded as a condition with faith or as an inevitable result of faith, there is no true assurance of salvation.³⁰ The insecurity of wondering whether one displays sufficient good works to be sure of salvation is agonizing and must be avoided.

According to the position of totally free grace, however, it is possible to know that one is saved, and to know it at the moment of salvation. A perfect example is the Philippian jailor. He was simply told to believe. Those who do so will therefore know that they have been saved, just as the jailor. Having made the prescribed response, he knew he was saved and rejoiced in that fact, as Acts 16:34 makes clear.³¹

7. *Distinction between salvation and fellowship with God.* The question arises: If works are neither a condition nor an essential fruit of salvation, what roles do they perform? Two should be noted. First, they enable us to maintain fellowship with God. Although not a necessity for receiving salvation, works are required for fellowship with God. It should be apparent that salvation and fellowship with God are two different things, just as faith and acceptance of Christ as Master are two different things. Fellowship with God and with Christ involves repentance and appropriate works.³² Being *in the faith* is not the same as being born again or justified.³³ Rather, being in the faith means "to be operating and acting within the parameters of our Christian conviction and belief, precisely as Paul claims to be doing in the immediately preceding verses [2 Cor. 13:1-4]."³⁴ While salvation is not conditioned upon repentance and good works, fellowship is: "But the fact still re-

28. Ibid., p. 24.

29. Ibid., p. 9.

30. Ibid., p. 10.

31. Ibid., p. 13.

32. Hodges, *Absolutely Free*, p. 168.

33. Ibid., p. 200.

34. Ibid., p. 201.

mains that God demands repentance from all and He conditions their *fellowship with Him* on that."³⁵

There is, as we have indicated, a second role for works. Hodges recognizes what James has said about being justified by works. This, however, must not be understood as justification before God. Rather, it is justification before humans. Works are the means by which the reality of one's salvation is seen by others.³⁶

8. *The indefectibility of the believer's salvation.* The strong emphasis upon the dispensability of works leads to the question of whether it is possible to lose one's salvation. Unlike many Calvinists, Hodges and those who share his theology hold that the faith of true believers can grow cold. Yet this does not mean that they lose their salvation. He says, "The simple fact is that the New Testament never takes for granted that believers will see discipleship through to the end. And it never makes this kind of perseverance either a condition or a proof of final salvation from hell."³⁷ In Luke 7 John the Baptist has clearly come to disbelieve. And warning passages in the Book of Hebrews describe individuals who had become Christians and then had fallen away. What they had fallen away from, however, was the church, not their salvation: "The Epistle to the Hebrews, therefore, is fundamentally concerned with the problem of those who draw back from their Christian commitment and conviction. Those who do so, of course, abandon the church (cf. 10:25). It is therefore the *visible household of faith* from which they secede. They cannot secede from the family of God, however, and precisely for this reason they are subject to God's discipline."³⁸

The "Lordship Salvation" View

Like the advocates of free grace, John MacArthur espouses a dispensational view. MacArthur's position, however, seems in some ways closer to classic Reformed or covenant theology. Witness the fact that prominent covenant or nondispensational Calvinists share his view. Among them are James Montgomery Boice, pastor of the Tenth Presbyterian Church of Philadelphia, a thoroughgoing Calvinist in the classical tradition; J. I. Packer, professor of theology at Regent College, a Reformed Anglican; and John Piper, pastor of the Bethlehem Baptist Church of Minneapolis, a strongly Calvinistic Baptist.³⁹ Each has indicated his strong approval of MacArthur's position, Packer and Boice in

35. *Ibid.*, p. 146.

36. *Ibid.*, pp. 173-74.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 80.

38. Hodges, *Gospel Under Siege*, pp. 75-76.

39. James Montgomery Boice, *Christ's Call to Discipleship* (Chicago: Moody, 1986); J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Chicago: Inter-Varsity, 1961); John Piper, *Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* (Portland: Multnomah, 1986).

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forewords to MacArthur's *Gospel According to Jesus*, and Piper in a
 very favorable review of the book.⁴⁰ The adherents of free grace contend
 that the shift to the view that faith involves an active obedience took
 place in the Puritan era and is therefore embodied in the Westminster
 standards and English Calvinism.⁴¹ It is distinguished from the posi-
 tion of free grace by several motifs:

1. *The identity of salvation and discipleship.* MacArthur insists that
 there is no twofold nature to the Christian life; one is not called first to
 salvation and then later to discipleship. According to that scheme, one
 could be a Christian without being a disciple. MacArthur is clear on
 this point: "The gospel Jesus proclaimed was a call to discipleship, a
 call to follow Him in submissive obedience, not just a plea to make a
 decision or pray a prayer."⁴² The invitations issued by Jesus specifi-
 cally involved discipleship and obedience to the Lord. Those who draw
 a distinction between faith and discipleship discard the intent of virtu-
 ally every recorded invitation of Jesus.⁴³ To respond to Jesus' call is to
 become a disciple; anything less than that is simply unbelief. It is a
 cheap and meaningless faith, not saving faith.⁴⁴

In MacArthur's understanding of Scripture, any distinction between
 disciple and believer is artificial. The two words are used synonym-
 ously throughout the Book of Acts (e.g., 5:14; 6:1). Further, separating
 the two by introducing the concept of nominal or carnal Christian is in-
 appropriate. While there are different degrees of spirituality or of sanc-
 tification, the idea of a bare Christianity which involves only belief but
 not commitment is untrue to Scripture.⁴⁵

2. *The necessity of repentance for salvation.* In sharp contrast to the
 free-grace theology, MacArthur insists that repentance is an indispens-
 able part of conversion. Repentance was paramount in Jesus' preaching.
 It was the very note on which he began his ministry (Matt. 4:17). Re-
 peatedly he enunciated the need for repentance, sometimes without
 mentioning faith. Repentance was also the basic theme of John the Bap-
 tist, and it was prominent in the early church's preaching as well.⁴⁶

Repentance has several components. It involves a change of mind
and an alteration of direction. It means a genuine intention to abandon

40. John Piper, "Putting God Back into Faith," review of *The Gospel According to Jesus* by John F. MacArthur, *Standard* 79.2 (Feb. 1989): 54-55.

41. Hodges, *Absolutely Free*, pp. 32-33; Thomas G. Lewellen, "Has Lordship Salvation Been Taught Throughout Church History?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 147 (Jan.-March 1990): 58.

42. MacArthur, *Gospel According to Jesus*, p. 21.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 30.

44. *Ibid.*, pp. 30-31. Boice, *Christ's Call to Discipleship*, p. 14, identifies this faith with the cheap grace of which Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in *The Cost of Discipleship*.

45. MacArthur, *Gospel According to Jesus*, pp. 24-25, 97-98, 196.

46. *Ibid.*, p. 66.

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one's sin. It includes intellectual, emotional, and volitional elements. MacArthur says, "As *metanoia* is used in the New Testament, it *always* speaks of a change of purpose, and specifically a turning from sin."⁴⁷

MacArthur is emphatic that repentance, as a critical element of saving faith, is necessary for salvation.⁴⁸ Inasmuch as it was an indispensable part of Jesus' message, it should be of ours as well: "No evangelism that omits the message of repentance can properly be called the gospel, for sinners cannot come to Jesus Christ apart from a radical change of heart, mind, and will. That demands a spiritual crisis leading to a complete turnaround and ultimately a wholesale transformation. It is the only kind of conversion Scripture recognizes."⁴⁹

3. *The inseparability of faith and obedience.* MacArthur goes to great lengths to spell out his understanding of true faith. It is not a humanly produced phenomenon; it is a gift of God, and it includes repentance as a critical and indispensable factor.⁵⁰ Most significant of all, however, "the faith God begets includes both the volition and the ability to comply with His will (cf. Philippians 2:13). In other words, faith encompasses obedience."⁵¹ MacArthur quotes with approval W. E. Vine's observation that the Greek verbs *peithō* ("obey") and *pisteuō* ("trust") are closely related etymologically, and that the former denotes the obedience produced by the latter.⁵² For Paul, faith and obedience were closely related, and sometimes synonymous (Rom. 6:17). The gospel was something to be obeyed (Rom. 10:16; 2 Thess. 1:8). The goal of Paul's ministry was that others come to obey God (Rom. 15:18), and he wrote repeatedly of the obedience of faith (Rom. 1:5; 16:26). In numerous other places in the New Testament, obedience is treated as synonymous with faith: John 3:36; Acts 6:7; Hebrews 5:9; 11:8. MacArthur even quotes Rudolf Bultmann's article in *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* to establish the equivalence of belief and obedience.⁵³

Having argued that obedience is equivalent to faith, and having earlier claimed that it is a critical part of faith, MacArthur somewhat paradoxically goes on to contend that it is "the inevitable manifestation of true faith."⁵⁴ He draws this conclusion from both negative and affirmative statements made by Paul. Paul wrote to Titus of those who profess to know God, but by their disobedience prove their unbelief (Titus

47. *Ibid.*, p. 162.

48. *Ibid.*

49. *Ibid.*, p. 167.

50. *Ibid.*, pp. 172–73.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 173.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 174.

53. *Ibid.*, pp. 174–75.

54. *Ibid.*, p. 175.

nal, and volitional elements. In the New Testament, it *always* signifies a turning from sin."⁴⁷

as a critical element of salvation, as much as it was an indispensable element as well: "No evangelism can properly be called the gospel, apart from a radical change of heart, a crisis leading to a complete transformation. It is the essence."⁴⁹

ence. MacArthur goes to great lengths to describe true faith. It is not a humanly devised religion and it includes repentance as the most significant of all, however, confession and the ability to command other words, faith encompassed with approval (W. E. Vine's "obey") and *pisteuō* ("trust") but the former denotes the obedience, and obedience were essential (Rom. 6:17). The gospel (1 Thess. 1:8). The goal of the gospel is to glorify God (Rom. 15:18), and he is to be glorified (Rom. 1:5; 16:26). In numerous instances, obedience is treated as synonymous (Rom. 5:9; 11:8). MacArthur even defines *theological Dictionary of the Bible* as the essence of belief and obedience.⁵³

ent to faith, and having ears that hear. MacArthur somewhat paradoxically describes an inevitable manifestation of unbelief in both negative and affirmative terms. He quotes Titus of those who profess to believe but do not prove their unbelief (Titus

1:16). Positively, he asserted that righteous living is an inevitable by-product of real faith (Rom. 10:10).⁵⁵

4. *Confession of Christ's lordship as a requisite for salvation.* MacArthur strongly objects to separating Christ's lordship from his saviorhood. Contrary to the view that Jesus called upon unbelievers to accept him only as Savior, and presented the call to acknowledge him as Lord to those who already were believers, MacArthur maintains that Jesus frequently made his lordship the crucial issue in his conversations with unbelievers. Everything he said to the rich young ruler demanded recognition of his lordship. He also indicated that the profession of those who called him Lord but did not obey was inauthentic (Matt. 7:21-23; Luke 6:46-49). MacArthur comments, "He made it clear that obedience to divine authority is a prerequisite of entry into the Kingdom. Clearly, His lordship is an integral part of the message of salvation."⁵⁶

A full understanding of the meaning of the word *Lord* is essential. It is certainly true that the word constituted a confession of the deity of Jesus Christ, as the school of free grace insists. It is not restricted to that meaning, however. "Lord" also means sovereign master. Thomas's confession, "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28), would be redundant if "Lord" were simply a synonym for God. Moreover, the context of Romans 10:9, especially verse 12, makes clear that Christ is "Lord of all." To confess him as Lord is therefore to acknowledge and accept him as Lord of all.⁵⁷

It is impossible to separate Jesus' lordship from his saviorhood. He cannot be Savior without being Lord. "Apart from His lordship, every aspect of His saving work is impossible."⁵⁸ The very core of the gospel is at issue here:

When we come to Jesus for salvation, we come to the One who is Lord over all. Any message omitting this truth cannot be called the gospel according to Jesus. It is a crippled message that presents a savior who is not Lord, a redeemer who does not demonstrate authority over sin, a weakened, sickly messiah who cannot command those he rescues. . . .

He is Lord, and those who refuse Him as Lord cannot use Him as Savior.⁵⁹

This insistence that confession of Christ's lordship is essential to salvation should not be interpreted as works righteousness. It is the Holy Spirit who enables one to confess Jesus as Lord. This is therefore no

55. *Ibid.*, pp. 175-76.

56. *Ibid.*, p. 204.

57. *Ibid.*, pp. 207-8.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 209.

59. *Ibid.*, pp. 209-10.

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more a meritorious human work than is believing on him. Both are God's sovereign work in the human heart.⁶⁰

5. *The difficulty of salvation.* MacArthur emphasizes that the Christian life is not an easy life, but a demanding and trying experience. He notes the contrast Jesus drew between the narrow and the broad way (Matt. 7:13–14). Jesus used several figures to depict the contrast: two gates, two roads, two destinations (eternal life and destruction), two groups of travelers (the few and the many). Here MacArthur takes issue with many dispensationalists by interpreting the narrow way not as a reference to the law, but to the gospel. He insists that Jesus had in view the difficulty of the way of salvation.⁶¹

MacArthur also cites Luke 13:23–30, where Jesus is asked whether there will be only a few who are saved. His reply is, "Strive to enter by the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able" (RSV). MacArthur points out that the word for "strive" here is *agōnizomai*, which implies an agonizing, intense, purposeful struggle. It is used in 1 Corinthians 9:25 of an athlete striving for victory, and in 1 Timothy 6:12 of the Christian fighting the good fight of faith. Salvation is not easy. The gate is small and few find it.⁶² Thus the idea of cheap grace must be rejected:

The message of Jesus cannot be made to accommodate any kind of cheap grace or easy-believism. The kingdom is not for people who want Jesus without any change in their living. It is only for those who seek it with all their hearts, those who agonize to enter. Many who approach the gate turn away upon finding out the cost. Lest someone object that this is a salvation of human effort, remember it is only the enablement of divine grace that empowers a person to pass through the gate. In the brokenness of divinely granted repentance, in the poverty of a divinely wrought humble spirit, God's power becomes the resource.⁶³

6. *Works as the assurance of salvation.* In Hodges's thinking, assurance that one is saved does not depend upon the presence of any kind of works, but rests solely upon God's promise that those who believe are saved. MacArthur's understanding is quite different. It is not wrong to question one's salvation. On the contrary, we are encouraged by Scripture to examine our lives to determine if we are in the faith (2 Cor. 13:5). The Bible indicates that the evidence of God's saving work in a life is the fruit that transformed behavior inevitably produces (1 John 3:10). If faith does not result in righteous living, it is dead and cannot save

60. *Ibid.*, p. 209.

61. *Ibid.*, pp. 179–80.

62. *Ibid.*, p. 182.

63. *Ibid.*, p. 183.

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(James 2:14-17). "Professing Christians utterly lacking the fruit of true righteousness will find no biblical basis for assurance they are saved (1 John 2:4)." ⁶⁴ The mark of a true Christian is perseverance to the end. True believers *will* persevere; turning from Christ or apostatizing is definite proof that one never was saved. ⁶⁵

The key to this matter of assurance is a correct understanding of the nature of salvation. It is not only justification. It also involves regeneration, sanctification, and ultimately glorification. MacArthur writes: "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." ⁶⁶

Analysis of the Issues

Both the adherents of totally free grace and the adherents of lordship salvation view the other position with alarm, as a perversion of the true gospel. Hodges sees MacArthur as jeopardizing salvation by grace by introducing the requirement of works for true salvation. MacArthur, on the other hand, views Hodges's position not as free grace, but cheap grace, which actually involves a form of antinomianism.

It may be best to note first those points on which the two views agree. The similarities are more numerous than might be thought:

1. Both are concerned that the Christian have assurance of personal salvation, although they have very different ideas about the basis or locus of such assurance.

2. Both desire to preserve the doctrine of salvation by grace. This is most obvious in Hodges's attempt to exclude any connection between salvation and works. It is also found in MacArthur's insistence that the entirety of the Christian's response to Christ—faith and commitment—is a gracious divine gift.

3. Both believe that discipleship and obedience to the Lord are important. MacArthur contends that they are requisite for (initial) salvation. Hodges emphasizes that the believer should move on to commitment and obedience.

What, then, are the underlying issues that have led to dispute? I believe there are three:

1. *The understanding of the concept of conversion.* Does conversion include faith only, or does it also involve repentance, whether as a necessary accompaniment of faith or a part of it? Hodges holds that faith is

64. Ibid., p. 23.

65. Ibid., p. 98.

66. Ibid.

all that is needed, whereas MacArthur insists upon the necessity of repentance as well.

The difficulty appears to stem in part from the fact that the Bible gives different formulas for conversion, different responses to the query, "What must I do to be saved?" Some passages, emphasized by Hodges, specify that faith is necessary for salvation, but make no mention of repentance. Other passages specify repentance, but make no mention of faith. The question is, How are we to interpret and integrate these passages, which ultimately is systematic theology's task? There are various possibilities:

a. We might regard one of the two sets of passages as primary from a hermeneutical standpoint and interpret the other set in that light. This appears to be the technique which Hodges has followed, elevating the passages where only faith is mentioned to a position of normativeness.

b. We might conclude that there are multiple (or at least dual) ways of salvation. One may be saved by faith or by repentance. The method varies with the individual, so that some need to believe and others to repent. Whatever a given individual lacks is what he or she must exercise.

c. We might conclude that both faith and repentance are necessary to salvation. In those biblical passages where only one is mentioned explicitly, the other is implicit. Repentance and faith would then be complementary aspects of a whole—conversion.

The two sets of passages we have in view can be represented symbolically as $F \supset S$ (i.e., "if faith, then salvation") and $R \supset S$. In actuality, the full biblical formula may well be $RF \supset S$. In those cases where one or the other component is implicit, the formula would be $R(F) \supset S$ or $F(R) \supset S$. It would be instructive to investigate whether the immediate context, the person(s) involved, or some other factor can account for the emphasis upon faith in some texts and upon repentance in others. While the limitations of space prohibit that endeavor here, my preliminary conclusion is that there is some support for such a hypothesis. In addition, the suggestion that faith and repentance are complementary (c) appears to offer a more adequate and accurate account of the data, and with fewer biblical and theological problems, than do the other two possibilities (a and b). At least on this point, then, MacArthur's approach is to be preferred.

2. *The basic element of salvation.* The *ordo salutis* of evangelical theology is a rich and manifold picture, involving such aspects as regeneration, justification, sanctification, and glorification. Different theologies emphasize different aspects of this wonderful reality. Thus, for example, Martin Luther emphasized justification whereas John Wesley put considerable emphasis upon sanctification. Where the emphasis is placed is often an indication of the real character of a particular theology. To oversimplify the matter, we might characterize free

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grace as stressing justification, and lordship salvation as emphasizing regeneration.

This characterization, however, deserves elaboration. At first sight it seems inaccurate, especially with respect to free grace. As we have seen, Hodges places great confidence in the permanent effect of regeneration. It is an irrevocable change which one cannot reverse by choice and determination. What is significant for our purposes, however, is that regeneration, according to this way of thinking, does not necessarily produce any discernible change in the behavior of the Christian. A person may be a born-again Christian, yet live in ways that are little if at all different from the unbelievers that constitute society. The crucial point is that the person has received a standing of righteousness before God. Thus it appears that what is most constitutive of salvation is justification. This is not to say that discipleship and sanctification are unimportant to Hodges, but that they are not indispensable components of salvation in its irreducible minimum. When repentance is not regarded as an aspect of conversion, the effect of salvation is to add something to, but not necessarily to remove anything from, what the individual was. The result is a change in one's relationship to God, but not necessarily in one's own nature.

MacArthur, on the other hand, makes much of the changed nature of the individual. Because there has been transformation, at least to some degree, there must inevitably be changed behavior, or good works. This is why good works can be the basis of assurance of salvation. To emphasize this change in internal nature, which leads to changes in conduct, is to emphasize regeneration rather than justification.

It is rather striking that both positions make little reference to union with Christ as a component of salvation. There are numerous references in Paul's writings to the believer's being "in Christ" (e.g., 1 Cor. 1:4-5; 15:22; 2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 1:3-4, 6-8; 2:10; 1 Thess. 4:16) and "with Christ" (e.g., Rom. 6:4; 8:17; Gal. 2:20; Eph. 2:5; Col. 2:20; 3:1). There also are statements about Christ's being in us (Gal. 2:20; Col. 1:27) or with us (Matt. 28:20; John 14:23). Perhaps most significant is Jesus' teaching about the vine and the branches (John 15:1-11), an analogy of the relationship between himself and the believer.

A good case can be made that union with Christ is an inclusive term for the whole of salvation—justification, regeneration, and sanctification are aspects of it. Thus, justification is not an external transfer of righteousness from Christ to the believer, but a matter of our possessing with Christ his righteousness by virtue of being united with him. Similarly, regeneration is not some abstract occurrence that vitalizes us, but Christ's spiritual vitality in and through us, or, as Paul put it in Galatians 2:20, Christ living in us. We also experience the blessing of adop-

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tion by the Father (another topic neglected by both camps) through becoming joint heirs with Christ, with whom we suffer and are glorified (Rom. 8:17).

This emphasis upon union with Christ would appear to favor the theology propounded by MacArthur, since it stresses the lordship of Christ and, accordingly, the vitality of the relationship between the believer and Christ. The emphasis on union with Christ also indicates that other aspects of the *ordo salutis*, such as justification and regeneration, are not as separable from one another as Hodges might suggest, since they are part of a whole. Yet it is my contention that both sides have neglected this important and even basic dimension of salvation, resulting in a somewhat depersonalized and formal understanding of the Christian life.

3. *The relationship between faith and works.* Hodges is rightly concerned to avoid any conception that works are necessary to obtain salvation. Where he differs from MacArthur is on the issue of whether works must necessarily follow salvation. MacArthur insists that if there is genuine salvation, there will be works as evidence. If works are absent, the genuineness of one's salvation is in doubt. MacArthur's position is more a case of "if no works, then no salvation," than of "if works, then salvation." There is a significant difference between these two propositions. To Hodges, however, MacArthur's version of the connection between faith and works seems to involve works righteousness as well. In fact, Hodges assumes that any emphasis upon works as proof of salvation implies that works contribute to salvation.

It appears that some additional analysis is in order. What MacArthur is saying is, "If there is salvation, there will be works. If there are no works, there is no salvation." Logically, this could be depicted as follows:

$$\begin{array}{l} S \supset W \\ \underline{\quad -W} \\ \therefore -S \end{array}$$

This is a logically valid conditional argument—denying the consequent (*modus tollens*). Hodges, however, appears to picture the argument differently:

$$\begin{array}{l} S \supset W \\ \underline{\quad W} \\ \therefore S \end{array}$$

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This, of course, is a fallacy, the fallacy of affirming the consequent. For W to imply S (i.e., for works to imply salvation) would require a different formula:

$$\begin{array}{l} W \supset S \\ \underline{W} \\ \therefore S \end{array}$$

This would be a form of salvation by works, or at least partially by works.

It may be helpful to consider as an analogy the statement, "If there is fire, there is smoke." A valid inference would be, "There is no smoke; therefore there is no fire." On the other hand, "There is smoke; therefore there is fire" does not necessarily hold. There could be other reasons for smoke, such as the release of some chemical into the atmosphere.

To be sure, MacArthur does seem to be saying, "Where there are works, there is salvation." This proposition should be considered in the context of inductive logic, however, in which a hypothesis is verified by accumulating many instances of evidence. This procedure, so widely followed in scientific experimentation, is actually an accumulation of many instances of what in a deductive approach to the formula, "Where there is salvation, there are works," would be the fallacy of affirming the consequent. The more instances that are accumulated, the more probable is the hypothesis.

Unfinished Agenda

Sharpening of the Logic

A number of steps should be followed if the dialogue is to progress in a productive fashion. First, an analysis similar to what we have already undertaken in this chapter needs to continue, with more precise definition of terms and closer attention to the syntax and logic of the arguments. Thus far in our analysis, Hodges has come in for the harsher treatment. Problems in argumentation are not restricted to him, however. MacArthur has been ambiguous in his discussion of the relationship of obedience to faith. He seems to alternate between saying that obedience is synonymous with faith, that it is part of faith, and that it is an inevitable accompaniment of faith. Such fluctuations do not contribute to precise understanding. Similarly, he seems to say both that repentance is part of faith and that it is an invariable companion of faith. This also introduces confusion.

One notable feature of Hodges's presentation is a rather heavy reliance upon the use of analogy. Analogy, unless the correspondence of the parts

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can be conclusively demonstrated, as in an algebraic equation, serves to illustrate or illuminate, not to argue or prove. Thus it helps us understand the meaning of a concept, but does not offer evidence for its truth. The only exceptions are cases where a concept seems to be either incoherent or internally contradictory and therefore untenable, and an analogy can serve to remove the apparent contradiction, thus making the concept at least potentially true. Hodges, however, seems to use analogies as if they count for the truth of the concept or argument being set forth. This part of his presentation needs refinement, to say the very least.

Further, on both sides there needs to be a careful analysis of some of the distinctions drawn, to see whether they are justified or artificial. Herein lie both the strength and the weakness of much dispensational exegesis and theologizing. Close attention to details, careful detection of subtle nuances, is vital, and is both a science and an art. At times, however, a terminological difference is without warrant made the basis of conceptual differences. The old distinction between the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God is an example. Hodges's explanation that James's statements about justification by works refer to justification before other human beings appears to be similarly artificial and strained. There are other examples in the writings of both camps that might warrant further scrutiny.

Lowering of the Emotional Tone of the Rhetoric

It is natural, when proponents of opposing positions believe that an essential element of the Christian message is being compromised or even undermined, to picture the difference of opinion in rather dramatic and absolute fashion. This leads to the suggestion that the other position is heresy, and a tendency to depict the opposition in the worst possible light. More-extreme responses are the inevitable result.

It may be that the two sides in this debate should make an effort to see how close to each other they actually are. If their assignment were to come to agreement, if there were some urgent need for agreement, if their lives depended upon doing so, they might find that they are not so far apart as they think. Perhaps if they sat down and questioned one another in an affirming fashion, each camp trying to determine wording that would make its position more acceptable to the other, an agreement might emerge. Consideration of a mediating position might help. For example, Darrell Bock suggests an alternative which, although he is basically a defender of free grace, comes quite close to MacArthur's position.⁶⁷ This is not to suggest that either party should compromise

67. Darrell L. Bock, "A Review of *The Gospel According to Jesus*," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 146 (Jan.-March 1989): 37-39.

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or concede sincerely held convictions, but that each should consider whether they have overreacted, misunderstood the other, or stated their own view in an unnecessarily extreme or unclear and thus misleading fashion. Dialogue is essential because this dispute has the potential for dividing congregations and the entire church of Jesus Christ, perhaps unnecessarily.

Identification of the Requisites for Salvation

Finally, the proponents of totally free grace and of lordship salvation should concentrate on determining what the precise requisites for salvation are and how much of each requisite must be consciously fulfilled. It is one thing to say that one must acknowledge the lordship of Christ. It is another thing to say that one must consciously understand and adhere to it. It is one thing to be unaware, or at least not consciously aware, of the lordship of Christ, and another to be aware of it and reject it. How explicit must one's awareness be? It is quite possible that a great deal is implicit in a belief in Jesus Christ. James Orr has said, "He who with his whole heart believes in Jesus as the Son of God is thereby committed to much else besides."⁶⁸ This is an area which has not yet been adequately examined—a factor which may be contributing to the confusion.

We have seen that the issue is sharply debated. It might be tempting to say, "Let's all work together, since we have the same goal of making everyone a full disciple of Christ. It makes little real difference whether that takes place in one step or two." Yet it does make a difference, for if one is taught that repentance and commitment are not necessary for salvation, it may be difficult to get that commitment at a later point. On the other hand, if the demands of discipleship are laid too heavily upon potential converts, some may never take the first step, especially the perfectionists, who often prove to be the most conscientious Christians once they accept Christ. It is therefore important that the debate continue. If it stimulates all of us to more intensive and careful study of the Scriptures and to theological reflection, it will have contributed positively to the life of the church.

68. James Orr, *A Christian View of God and the World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), p. 4.