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FIRST RESPONSE TO "FAITH ACCORDING TO THE APOSTLE JAMES" BY JOHN F. MACARTHUR, JR.

EARL D. RADMACHER*

When the apostle Paul called for the elders of the church at Ephesus to meet him at Miletus, he spoke with extreme concern about the doctrinal dangers threatening that church both from without and from within: "For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after themselves. Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears" (Acts 20:28-31).

The Church in America faces similar problems today, although the epicenter seems to be more from within than from without. There seems to be general agreement about the nature of the problem, especially in evangelicalism, but it has been put succinctly by Charles Colson:

> Pollsters tell us that 50 million Americans say they are born again. Evangelicals have come out of the closet in recent years, accompanied by a surge of Christian books, records, celebrities and candidates.
>
> No doubt about it, religion is up. But so are values unremittingly opposed to the truth of Christianity: One out of every two marriages shatters in divorce; one out of three pregnancies terminates in abortion. Homosexuality is no longer considered depravity, but an "alternative lifestyle." Crime continues to soar—in "Christian" America there are 100 times more burglaries than in "pagan" Japan.
>
> That is the great paradox today: Sin abounds in the midst of unprecedented religiosity. If there are so many of us, why are we not affecting our world?[1]

If the statistics concerning the number and nature of "born-again" people are true, then we certainly have the largest spiritual nursery ever in American history and we are suffering desperately from the tragedy of protracted infancy.

Although there seems to be consensus as to the problem, at least in its manifestations, there is a great diversity in the suggested solutions that have arisen and developed disciples among Bible-believing evangelicals.

* Earl Radmacher is chancellor of Western Conservative Baptist Seminary in Portland, Oregon.

[1] C. Colson, "Playing It Safe Is Just Playing," *Christianity Today* (October 17, 1986).

Three of them stand out to me. On the one hand, there are the reconstructionists or theonomists who are convinced that the spiraling antinomianism in our society is the result of departure from the law of Moses. Their solution is to reestablish the law as the *modus operandi* for sanctification of believers who have been justified by grace through faith.

Another group of evangelicals sees the answer to the current chaos in a return to High-Church authority. Authority in the hands of the masses of the people has produced a religious society similar to that in the time of the Judges: "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judg 21:25). Consequently some evangelicals have even turned to Roman Catholicism in a search for authority that will bring order.

Yet another group, of which John MacArthur is a dynamic spokesman, sees the answer to the absence of true Christian lifestyle in an unwarranted separation of justification from sanctification, of sonship from discipleship, and of faith from works. His book-length treatise delineating his concern is *The Gospel According to Jesus*, which expresses his thesis in statements such as the following: "No promise of salvation is ever extended to those who refuse to accede to Christ's lordship. Thus, there is no salvation except 'lordship salvation.'"[2] "Salvation is a gift, yet it costs everything."[3] "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."[4] "So-called 'faith' in God that does not produce this yearning to submit to His will is not faith at all. The state of mind that refuses obedience is pure and simple unbelief."[5]

After carefully reading thousands of response letters, MacArthur detected a common thread of dispute—namely, conflicting perceptions of what Scripture means when it speaks of faith. Thus the questions the "lordship salvation" debater must ultimately answer, according to MacArthur's paper on James, are the following:

> Is it enough to know and understand and assent to the facts of the gospel—even holding the "inward conviction" that these truths apply to me personally—and yet never shun sin or submit to the Lord Jesus? Is a person who holds that kind of belief guaranteed eternal life? Does such a hope constitute faith in the sense in which Scripture uses the term?

Believing that James gives a resounding "No!" and "sounds almost as if he were writing to twentieth-century 'no-lordship' advocates," MacArthur seeks to establish his argument primarily from Jas 1:19-27; 2:14-26. And the major thrust of his argument is directed against the view expressed by Zane Hodges in *The Gospel Under Siege: A Study on Faith and Works*, *Dead Faith: What Is It?*, and *Absolutely Free: A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation.*

[2] J. F. MacArthur, Jr., *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988) 28.
[3] Ibid. 31.
[4] Ibid. 135.
[5] Ibid. 176.

In the brief scope of this paper I cannot take the time to respond to the areas of agreement with MacArthur. Let me just list a few representative statements to which I say "Amen":

One enters into salvation by grace through faith.

Hearing without obeying is self-deception.

You cannot show faith without works.

Even more basic is our agreement on the inerrancy of the autographs and the single sense of the author. Because of our mutual commitment to the authority of the author, I want to raise some questions that may help us all get closer to that which James meant by what he said.

First, MacArthur does not do justice to Hodges' claim that the warnings of James 2 cannot be directed at false professors instead of true believers. After acknowledging the presence of fifteen usages of "brethren" in James (six prefaced by "my" and three by "my beloved"), without any interaction with the usages he simply begs the question by saying that "it is common for apostolic writers to include in letters addressed to churches stern warnings for those whose profession of faith was questionable."

He never attempts to support such a claim. But, furthermore, James does not simply "include" those who are falling short of demonstrating their faith in works. Rather, he addresses them repeatedly and names their self-deception, inconsistency and carnal behavior. These are serious charges about behavior that can lead to the physical death of believers (1:15: 5:20). The apostle Paul's words in 1 Cor 11:30[6] certainly corroborate this. James and Paul speak with one voice.

Contrary to MacArthur's view about the recipients, Martin Dibelius, writing on James 2, concludes:

> But in all of the instances (in James) which have been examined thus far, what is involved is the faith which the Christian has, never the faith of the sinner, which first brings him to God. . . . The faith which is mentioned in this section can be presupposed in every Christian. . . . (James') intention is not dogmatically oriented, but practically oriented: *he wishes to admonish the Christians to practice their faith, i.e., their Christianity, by works.*[7]

It is certainly no small matter to misconstrue the nature of the recipients of the exhortation. The issue is blessing for endurance by believers (cf. 1:4).

A second problem relates to MacArthur's handling of the word "faith," a word that is used sixteen times in James without ever needing a modifier. Yet the following modifiers with "faith" are sprinkled through MacArthur's paper: "counterfeit" faith, "authentic" faith, "spurious" faith, "imitation" faith, "nominal" faith, "passive" faith, "sluggish" faith, "intellectual" faith, "sensual" faith, "dead" faith, "traditional" faith, "demon" faith, "heart" faith, "spiritual" faith, "vital" faith, "transforming" faith, "personal" faith, "orthodox" faith, "actual" faith, "real" faith, "obedient" faith, "saving" faith, "efficacious" faith.

[6] "For this reason many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep."

[7] M. Dibelius, *James* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) 178 (italics his).

In "Faith According to the Apostle James" MacArthur entitles his first main section "James' Assault on Spurious Faith" (a modifier James never uses). Then he says that James says, "The single factor that distinguishes counterfeit faith from the real thing is the righteous behavior inevitably produced in those who have authentic faith." But James does not contrast counterfeit faith and authentic faith. Rather, he contrasts faith that shows itself in works and faith that does not show itself in works. Both are faith.

The question, then, is not whether or not people have faith. It is whether or not their faith is showing itself in works. The opposite of faith is unbelief or nonfaith, not absence of works. What a believer does with his faith will be the basis of his current judgment in the world ("justified by works") and his future judgment by Christ. Faith without works is useless in this life and results in serious loss at the judgment seat of Christ (cf. 2 John 7-8). Contrariwise the works of believers will strengthen their faith and advance Christ's kingdom in this life and pay rich dividends at the judgment seat of Christ (cf. Mark 10:28-31). Once again, Paul's teaching concerning the believer's works coalesces with James' teaching (cf. 1 Cor 3:13-15; 2 Cor 5:10; Jas 5:7-9).

A third and related problem is MacArthur's statement that James says, "People can be deluded into thinking they believe when in fact they do not." Nowhere does James make or infer such a statement. Furthermore it seems to betray common sense. Hodges is right on target: "The Bible never invites people to believe that they believe. It invites them to believe."[8] It is not our job to encourage people to have faith in their faith but to enlarge the object of their faith. The model of Christ in the upper room is most instructive. Knowing the lack of faith that Peter would exhibit on the night of his denial, Christ does not question his faith. Rather, he proceeds to fill the object of his faith with revelation about God. He expands Peter's understanding of the resources he has in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

We need to beware of the tendency to overpsychologize the word "faith" and add to it more semantic baggage than it was ever intended to carry by distinguishing faith and saving faith or some other kind of faith. What the Bible does distinguish is faith and unbelief. Faith is faith.[9]

Hodges puts it simply:

> What faith really is in biblical language, is receiving the testimony of God. It is the *inward conviction* that what God says to us in the gospel is true. That—and that alone—is saving faith.[10]

This is the faith that saves from eternal destruction because it has the gospel as its object (cf. 1 Cor 1:21; 15:1-5). It would be even more consis-

[8] Z. C. Hodges, *Dead Faith: What Is It?* (Dallas: Redención Viva, 1987) 14.

[9] An excellent treatment of the relationship of everyday faith and saving faith is G. H. Clark, *Faith and Saving Faith* (Jefferson: Trinity Foundation, 1983).

[10] Z. C. Hodges, *Absolutely Free! A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation* (Dallas: Redención Viva, 1989) 31.

tent to talk about faith in the saving gospel rather than about "saving faith."

It has been asked: "Is it true that people know intuitively whether their faith is real?" Absolutely. That is certainly the point of 1 John 5:10: "He who believes in the Son of God has the witness in himself; he who does not believe God has made him a liar, because he has not believed the testimony that God has given of his Son." Surely it could not be put more simply.

In response to the question, "Is it mere intellectual assent?" Hodges exclaims, "Of course *not*! To describe faith that way is to demean it as a trivial, academic exercise, when in fact it is no such thing."[11]

Speaking to the same point, Charles Ryrie states:

> It is obvious that faith involves more than a knowledge of facts. The facts must be there or faith is empty. But giving assent to the truth of those facts is also a part of faith. But even assent, however genuine, must be accompanied by an act of the will to trust in the truth which one has come to know and assented to.[12]

A fourth and very critical problem is the reductionistic error that MacArthur and many others commit on the word "save" or "salvation." In the most elementary concordance study of these words we quickly learn of the breadth of the rescue or deliverance conveyed by them whether physical or spiritual deliverance, whether past, present or future deliverance. Most discussions focus on positional deliverance or justification salvation (the removal of sin and the imputation of Christ's righteousness).

Passages that are addressing the issue of present-tense deliverance (sanctification salvation) from the power of sin are often misconstrued as references to the results of justification. In so doing, not only is great confusion created in the issue of grace versus works but a great loss of motivation to move on to maturity is experienced. Christ and the apostles use the fact of eternal rewards throughout the NT to motivate believers to endure. Among the first and last words of Christ recorded in Scripture is the motivation of reward (cf. Matt 5:11-12; Rev 22:12-14).

MacArthur misses this motivation in James because he begins his treatment with the presupposition that the major purpose of the book is to show that those who are eternally saved will inevitably demonstrate righteous behavior. A logical problem is thereby created, however, for that which is an inevitable consequence must of logical necessity be a condition. Yet MacArthur strongly affirms—and we strongly agree—that eternal salvation is by grace alone through faith alone. We both agree that there are no conditions.

If MacArthur would go back to the early verses of James, however, there would be good reason for reassessing his view of the author's

[11] Ibid.

[12] C. C. Ryrie, *So Great Salvation: What It Means to Believe in Jesus Christ* (Wheaton: Victor, 1989) 121.

purpose. James' main point was to show how believers can achieve spiritual maturity (cf. 1:4). J. Ronald Blue has summarized the epistle well:

> James has given clear instructions about how to achieve practical holiness and spiritual maturity. His pointed exhortations were designed to stab the consciences and stir the souls of his beloved Jewish brothers. Stand with confidence, serve with compassion, speak with care, submit with contrition, and share with concern. A believer should be what God wants him to be, do what God wants him to do, say what God wants him to say, sense what God wants him to sense, and share what God wants him to share. Spiritual maturity involves every aspect of life.[13]

Given this understanding, it is easy to see that the salvation issue at hand is not positional justification but practical sanctification. And perhaps Hodges is closer to the meaning of James than some have thought. Note his observation:

> In 1:21-25 the inspired writer is saying that the readers will be "saved" (that is their lives will be saved) if they are doers rather than just hearers of God's Word. And in 2:14-26 . . . he is saying that they will be "saved" (in the same sense), not by what they believe (faith) but by what they do about what they believe (works). Thus, the word "saved" in 2:14 is most naturally construed in the same basic sense as that found in 1:21 and 5:19, 20. It has nothing to do with eternal destiny at all, but deals instead with the life-preserving benefits that obedience brings to the Christian and which cannot be experienced by mere hearing or by faith alone.[14]

To round out the issue of salvation in James, I would make a correction of Hodges. It is not true to say that "saved" in these passages "has nothing to do with eternal destiny at all." I do believe, and so does Hodges, that what I do today has something to do with my eternal destiny. I am becoming (sanctification) today by what I do with what Christ purchased for me (justification) what I will be (glorification) in the life to come. Today is a day of changing into his image (2 Cor 3:18), on to maturity (cf. Heb 6:1). At his coming there will be no more changing. I will go on being what I have become. James holds the day of reckoning, the judgment seat of Christ (Jas 5:7-11), before the persecuted brethren. Their blessing, their reward, is yet to come. With this the apostle Paul once again would agree with the apostle James (2 Tim 2:1-13). Rather than contradicting one another, they harmonize beautifully.

Finally, as Paul felt the strong need to warn the elders of Ephesus concerning distorted teachings from among the brethren, we have as great a need today. I fear that some current definitions of faith and repentance are not paving the road back to Wittenberg but, rather, paving the road back to Rome. Justification is becoming "to make righteous" rather than "to declare righteous." Repentance is becoming "penitence"

[13] J. R. Blue, "James," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* (ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck; Wheaton: Victor, 1983) 835.

[14] Hodges, *Dead Faith* 13.

(if not "penance") rather than "changing the mind." And "faith" is receiving more analysis and scrutinizing rather than the "object of faith."

In the fall of 1983 a Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue group, after eighteen years of dialogue, issued a remarkable statement that concluded that there is a basic unity between Catholics and Lutherans on the doctrine of justification. It states:

> Catholics . . . hold that the sanctifying action of the Holy Spirit removes the guilt of sin (reatus culpae) and renders the justified pleasing in God's sight. . . . Catholics, convinced that justification removes whatever is hateful to God in the justified, hold that the good works of the righteous give title to salvation itself, in the sense that God has covenanted to save those who, prompted by grace, obey his will.[15]

I agree with W. Robert Godfrey's analysis of this: "The report concedes too much to Roman Catholicism on man's involvement in maintaining his state of justification. . . . True Protestantism cannot concede with Rome at this point."[16] The statement sounds terribly similar, however, to much that I hear from the advocates of "lordship salvation."

[15] W. R. Godfrey, "Reversing the Reformation," *Eternity* 35 (September 1984) 27.

[16] Ibid.