

A REVIEW OF JOHN MACARTHUR'S *HARD TO BELIEVE: THE HIGH COST AND INFINITE VALUE OF FOLLOWING JESUS*

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I. INTRODUCTION

John MacArthur is the author of scores of books and commentaries, Pastor of Grace Community Church in Southern California, which averages 7000-9000 in attendance on any given Sunday, Radio preacher with the program *Grace to You* heard on thousands of stations in North and South America, as well as Europe, President of The Master's College and The Master's Seminary, and popular conference speaker.

A few years back I visited the *Grace to You* headquarters and spent several hours talking with Dr. Phil Johnson, the Executive Director of that ministry. During that time John MacArthur stopped by and we spoke briefly. He is a people person who has lots of charisma. In addition, as this and many of his other books attest, he boldly speaks what he is convinced is true, whether it is popular or not.

In this case, it appears that MacArthur wrongly thinks that what he is saying is a view held by a very small minority of people in Evangelicalism. The back cover has the following words in all caps at the top:

THERE IS NO USER-FRIENDLY, SEEKER-SENSITIVE
GOSPEL. THERE IS ONLY THE TRUTH.

I believe that MacArthur is wrong in thinking his view is politically incorrect. In reality, I believe what he is saying is essentially what the vast majority of Evangelicals believe. While most do not state the case as strongly as he does, the truth is, most today do not believe in justification by faith alone. Most would indeed agree that it is *hard to believe*.

II. THE THESIS OF THIS BOOK: BELIEVING IS FOLLOWING JESUS AND THAT IS HARD

The point of this book is well captured in the title and subtitle, *Hard to Believe: The High Cost and Infinite Value of Following Jesus*. MacArthur is convinced that it is hard to believe in Jesus. The reason it is hard is because he views belief in Jesus as not merely being convinced that He gives eternal life to the one who believes in Him. Rather, believing in Jesus is following Him. And following Jesus is said to be costly in Scripture.

The astute reader would wonder, then, about following Jesus. Is that not something that occurs *over time*? If so, don't the title and subtitle imply that one doesn't believe at a point in time, but instead over the course of a life of following Jesus?

As surprising as it might seem, that does indeed appear to be what MacArthur now believes. I will give evidence of that below.

III. JUSTIFICATION IS NOT BY SIMPLE FAITH

The author strongly advocates justification by faith alone elsewhere in his books and sermons. And I'm convinced that even now he still would formally acknowledge that he believes that doctrine. However, I was only able to find a single direct reference to that doctrine (p. 187). By *direct reference* I mean a place where he mentions the phrase "justification by faith alone."

I also found a number of places where the author indicates that salvation is by faith in Jesus Christ. However, in all of these places the author is careful to indicate that this "faith" includes repentance, obedience, and surrender. For example, MacArthur writes, "Salvation is giving up your life and embracing His. It is taking Christ by faith, acknowledging the reality of who He is and what He did."¹ However, if you notice, even here where he says that salvation "is taking Christ by faith," we do not have anything that implies that this is faith *alone*. Notice that this is preceded by "salvation is giving up your life and embracing His."

Here's another example. "I pray that in Your grace, You would save, before it is too late, any who have been deceived into thinking they're

¹ John MacArthur, *Hard to Believe: The High Cost and Infinite Value of Following Jesus* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2003), 178.

true believers without any passion for the worship of the God and Savior in whom they say they believe.”² Here worship is somehow part of believing. Indeed, he goes on in that paragraph to say, “Lest the day come when, like the people of John 6:66, they walk no more with Him, and like Judas, they go to the place of everlasting judgment reserved for such traitors.”³ In other words, “true” believing in Jesus includes persevering in one’s walk with Him.

Similarly, “The Bible clearly tells us that salvation comes through believing in Christ.”⁴ This is in a chapter dealing with evangelism. But there is nothing in that context that indicates that simply by believing some facts about Jesus one is born again. Indeed, in the immediately preceding context MacArthur writes, “It’s absolutely critical that the world not only hear the gospel of Jesus Christ, but that people understand it accurately and believe it absolutely.”⁵ Two things should be noted here. First, the accurate understanding of the gospel is, in MacArthur’s view, recognizing that it is hard to believe and that believing is following Christ to the end. Second, this gospel must be believed *absolutely*. In light of the entire book, that suggests a total dedication to Jesus and worship of and service for Him.

Speaking of “false Christians,” the author says, “They had no interest in repentance or obedience or submission (which, by the way, is why you have to preach repentance, obedience, and submission).”⁶

Nowhere does MacArthur attempt to explain how justification can be by faith alone, and yet also be by repentance, obedience, and surrender. If justification requires more than faith, then it is not by faith alone.

IV. TRUE FOLLOWING IS WHOLEHEARTED, SELFLESS, AND ENDURING

There are several chapters in this book which attempt to make as clear as possible what a “true follower” of Jesus is. For if believing is following, then we need to know what following Jesus looks like.

² Ibid, 182.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid, 184.

⁵ Ibid, 183.

⁶ Ibid, 175.

MacArthur realizes that Jesus had followers who didn't believe in Him. So in one sense his entire thesis makes no sense. For if believing is following then all who follow are believers.

This is where the author pulls out lots of adjectives. He speaks of "true disciples,"⁷ "shallow followers,"⁸ "superficial disciples,"⁹ and "temporary followers."¹⁰

One would think that the author would acknowledge that if one has to follow his whole life and, not only follow, but follow deeply so as to be a profound disciple, then it would be impossible to know where you or anyone else is going until death. Yet MacArthur feels it is important to cling to the possibility of assurance.

In the chapters on "Traitors to the Faith," he writes:

Look at people who claim to be Christians, and see how deeply they worship the Lord. See how they sing the songs. Ask them what their prayer lives are like. How important is it for them to be in church on the Lord's Day? Is Jesus Christ the love of their lives? Is it obvious?

You can tell, if you look close enough. True believers show a deep humility, a sense of genuine respect for and awe of Jesus Christ. Are they marked by adoring wonder?¹¹

I've not seen instructions like this before. I've seen lists to determine if you yourself are regenerate. But here is a foolproof way of telling, if you look close enough, who are born again and who are not.

Frankly, I think the author does not expect us to take him literally here. If that were the case, then we could grant others assurance, and this is something he tells us elsewhere we can never do. In addition, if followers must endure to be genuinely saved followers, how could I observe lifelong followers of Christ when they are still alive and potentially have years or decades left to live? Surely it is possible that they might cease following and hence prove to be what the author calls "temporary follower[s]"?

⁷ Ibid, 168, 174.

⁸ Ibid, 167.

⁹ Ibid, 164.

¹⁰ Ibid, 161.

¹¹ Ibid, 169.

V. A LINEAR VIEW OF CONVERSION?

As mentioned above, MacArthur in this book seems to be saying that a person is born again over the course of his life and not at a point in time. I say “seems to be saying” because there are places in the book where he implies that justification occurs at a point in time. Yet there are other places where the author clearly states that justification is a lifelong process.

Consider the following statement:

Don't believe anyone who says it's easy to become a Christian. Salvation for sinners cost God His own Son; it cost God's Son His life, and it'll cost you the same thing. Salvation isn't the result of an intellectual exercise. *It comes from a life lived in obedience and service to Christ as revealed in the Scripture; it's the fruit of actions, not intentions.* There's no room for passive spectators: words without actions are empty and futile. Remember that what John saw was a Book of Life, not a Book of Intellectual Musings. *The life we live, not the words we speak, determines our eternal destiny.*¹²

If by “salvation” MacArthur means justification, which is clear contextually, then he is saying justification does not come until one has lived obediently! Note that this salvation is “the fruit of actions.” In other words, the salvation comes after the actions, not before. The expression “fruit of actions” clearly means that you don't have the fruit, the salvation, until you have the actions, the works. Note too that our eternal destiny is determined by “the life we live.” Thus until life has been lived, one's eternal destiny is still in doubt.

He writes elsewhere:

Entrance into the kingdom requires earnest endeavor, untiring energy, and utmost exertion, because Satan is mighty, his demons are powerful, and sin holds us fast. God can break that hold and free our hearts to respond. The kingdom is not for weaklings and compromisers; it is not for the half-committed, the lovers of the world, or the shallow disciples who want to hold on to the stuff that perishes. The kingdom is for those

¹² Ibid, 93.

who are willing to affirm their desperate need for salvation from sin and seize the offer of grace.¹³

Admittedly the last sentence seems to imply justification at a point in time. But what of the sentences which precede it? To enter the kingdom requires three Es: earnest *endeavor*, untiring *energy*, and utmost *exertion*. Clearly the endeavor, energy, and exertion are not point-in-time events. They must occur over time. This is clear in that he says “*untiring energy*” is a condition for kingdom entrance. It is also important to see that even commitment is not enough. The “half-committed” won’t make it into the Kingdom. Only the fully committed over the course of their whole life will make it into the Kingdom.

It is widely agreed that Martin Luther held to a linear view of conversion. It seems that MacArthur has now adopted that view. Certainly that fits the view of assurance found in his other writings. One must continually look at his works to see how likely it is that he is going to make it. But, since any of us can fall away in the future, this assurance can not be certain until one dies.

VI. WHO’S NOT SURE WHAT THE GOSPEL IS?

MacArthur indicts the Free Grace crowd for something that is true of himself. He has a great discussion of the fact that people can’t come to faith until they know what the gospel is.¹⁴ He says, rightly, that this is one of Satan’s favorite strategies.

Then he goes on to indicate what the gospel message includes. He mentions making Jesus Lord of one’s life, faith alone, through grace alone, in Christ alone, repentance from sin, and the substitutionary atonement. The funny thing is that while he claims that we in the Free Grace camp have “fuzzy faith,” his own explanation of what is required to get into the Kingdom is exceedingly fuzzy. How can kingdom entrance be by faith alone in Christ alone and yet also require making Christ Lord of one’s life and turning from sins? How can it require only faith and yet also earnest *endeavor*, untiring *energy*, and utmost *exertion*?

And in what sense is the issue what must be *believed* if the heart of the issue concerns our *works*? A careful reading of this book shows that the author himself is not sure what the gospel is. He hopes that his

¹³ Ibid, 149.

¹⁴ Ibid, 187-88.

readers will believe enough, commit enough, follow enough, and work hard enough for long enough in order to make it into the Kingdom. He doesn't want anyone to be a weakling who goes to hell because he failed to be strong enough in his devotion to Christ. Sadly, he has no way of knowing, contrary to his suggestion elsewhere as noted above, who will endure to the end and make it into the Kingdom.

VII. CONCLUSION

Hard to Believe is, frankly, hard to believe. As one who has followed the writings of MacArthur since 1988, I find this book to be a somewhat radical departure for him. While we find the same calls for commitment and repentance and obedience, now we find that salvation comes from a life lived in obedience and service. This we have not seen from this author before. Now we find direct statements indicating that untiring energy, exertion, and endeavor are required.

The very title is a departure. Before MacArthur would accuse the Grace position of being *easy believism*, but he never dared suggest the obvious—that his position can actually rightly be described as *hard believism*. But with this book we now have a respected evangelical leader saying that belief itself is hard. And he says this is so not because the things to be believed are so difficult to accept, but because in his view saving faith is much more than facts to believe. Saving faith is a life of following Christ. It is hard work.

I find it ironic that one of the great modern-day opponents of works salvation is nonetheless himself now advocating works salvation.

This is a book which I believe every pastor and church leader should read and discuss. *JOTGES* readers will almost certainly want to read this book. If *The Gospel According to Jesus* moved you to greater fervor for sharing the grace gospel, *Hard to Believe* will raise that fervor to the red line. I suggest you read this book in small snatches. Otherwise you might find you can't sleep at night because of all the adrenaline rushing through your veins.