

Sola Fide—Faith Alone
by Bob Nyberg

On October 31, 1517 Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-five Theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. One of the primary factors that caused him to break away from the Roman Catholic Church was his understanding of Sola Fide—the doctrine that man is justified by faith alone without works. That doctrine has been the foundation of the Protestant churches since that time. Unfortunately, the doctrine of Sola Fide seems to be crumbling from within the ranks of Evangelical faith today.

A certain document called “The Evangelicals and Catholics Together—The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium” has seemingly compromised the doctrine of Sola Fide. This document was written by 20 well known Evangelical leaders and 20 well known Catholic leaders. One of the stated purposes of this document was: *To provide a statement that would advance Christian fellowship, cooperation and mutual trust between Evangelical Protestants and Roman Catholics.* The document implies that evangelicals and Roman Catholics should be united on the basis of their being able to affirm this statement: We are justified by grace through faith, because of Christ. All Roman Catholics can agree to this statement. However, if you add the word “alone” to the word “faith” the Roman Catholics will not accept it.

John Ankerberg hosted a round-table discussion with James Kennedy, John MacArthur and R. C. Sproul. In this discussion these men did an excellent job delineating the difference between the Protestant concept and the Roman Catholic concept of justification. The Protestant doctrine of Sola Fide maintains that the sinner is justified by grace through faith alone. The Roman Catholic doctrine of justification adds works to faith which the apostle Paul states to be another gospel. In fact, Paul says that anyone preaching a gospel other than Sola Fide is under the anathema or curse of God. At the end of this discussion the audience was given an opportunity to ask questions of this panel. The first question asked was extremely pertinent to the subject. This is what was asked:

I come from Brazil, the largest Roman Catholic country in the world. I heard you gentlemen say that what is at stake here is the gospel. Therefore aren't those who advocate Lordship salvation guilty of the same mistake as Roman Catholics are by adding works to the gospel therefore denying justification by faith alone?

Since Dr. MacArthur is one of the leading advocates of Lordship salvation, he was asked to respond to this question. I would like to examine his response.

JM: That is a straw man. To say that Lordship salvation, whatever that term might mean to people, has the connotation that you must believe in Jesus as Lord in order to be saved—I don't know how that all of a sudden became an aberrant view. But somewhere down the path it has become aberrant in some circles to affirm the Lordship of Jesus Christ in spite of the fact the Paul said you have to confess with your mouth as Jesus as Lord in order to be saved.

Dr. MacArthur begins by saying that those who hold to the Grace position have set up a straw man. A straw man is a weak opposition or argument set up only to be easily refuted. In reality it's Dr. MacArthur who has built the straw man. He would have us believe that those who hold to the grace position deny the Lordship of Jesus Christ. In Dr. MacArthur's book, “Faith Works”, he labels the Grace position as the “no-lordship position”. By this he implies that men such as Dr. Charles Ryrie and Dr. Zane Hodges do not acknowledge the Lordship of Jesus Christ. This

would be laughable if it didn't impugn the doctrinal integrity of these men. The term Lord carries with it the idea of Sovereignty or Deity. To say that the Grace position denies the Lordship of Jesus is tantamount to saying that it denies the Deity of Jesus Christ. This is absolutely ridiculous.

If a person were inclined to build a straw man, one could easily make a case that Dr. MacArthur himself denies the Deity of the Lord Jesus. In his commentary on Hebrews Dr. MacArthur states:

Son is an incarnational title of Christ. It is only an analogy to say that God is Father and Jesus is Son—God's way of helping us understand the essential relationship between the first and second Persons of the Trinity. Christ was not Son until His incarnation. (p. 27, 28).

Dr. MacArthur denies the eternal sonship of the Lord Jesus. He says that Jesus became the Son of God at His incarnation. But the Bible clearly teaches that Jesus has always been the Son of God. Miles Stanford points out that:

The Lord Jesus did not become the Son of God in the incarnation; He became the Son of Man! There is a difference. To define His Deity (Son of God) by His Humanity (Son of Man) is a vital error.

Son of God is His title of Deity. Son of man is His title of humanity. To say that Jesus became the Son of God at His incarnation, borders on denying His Deity before He took on human form.

The Eternal Sonship is taught in many passages of scripture. The following verses would make no sense if Jesus were not the Son of God before he came as a baby in Bethlehem:

Jn 3:16 For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

1 Jn 4:14 ...the Father sent the Son [to be] the Saviour of the world.

1 Jn 4:9 ...God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him.

The Lord Jesus was the Son of God at the time that He was sent into the world. He did not become the Son at the time He was sent. In commenting on 1 John 4:9 W.E. Vine said:

[This] does not mean that God sent out into the world one who at His birth in Bethlehem had become His Son. Compare the parallel statement, "God sent forth the Spirit of His Son (Gal. 4:6)," which could not mean that God sent forth One who became His Spirit when He sent Him.

In denying the eternal sonship of Jesus Christ, Dr. MacArthur comes close to denying the eternal Deity the Son of God. No one that I know of who teaches the Grace position denies the eternal Sonship of Jesus Christ. Yet, Dr. MacArthur would lead us believe that those who teach salvation by grace alone deny the Lordship or Deity of Christ. The Grace position does not say that a person can be saved without acknowledging the Lordship or Deity of Jesus Christ. In this strawman, Dr. MacArthur only covers up the real issue of the debate. Lordship salvation maintains that in order for a person to be saved he has to **make** Jesus Lord of his life. In other words, a person has to completely forsake his sins and vow 100% obedience to the commands of Christ in order to be saved. Dr. MacArthur made this very clear in his book, "The Gospel According to Jesus". Here's what he teaches in this regard:

The gospel Jesus proclaimed was a call to discipleship, a call to follow Him in submissive obedience... p 21

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. p 28

The call to surrender to the lordship of Jesus is part and parcel of His invitation to salvation. p 112

The call He (Jesus) issued was for individuals... to surrender in faith to the yoke of His lordship. p 117

He (Jesus) never held forth the hope of salvation to anyone who refused to submit to His sovereign lordship. p 134

Any doctrine making surrender to Christ's lordship optional is bad teaching. Clearly it is a departure from what Christians have always affirmed. Thus, "lordship salvation" is neither modern nor heretical but is the very heart of historical Christian soteriology. To label it as false teaching is foolhardy and thoughtless at best. To teach anything else is to withdraw from the mainstream of church teaching through the ages. p 237

He (Jesus talking to the rich young ruler) said, "Unless I can be the highest authority in your life, there's no salvation for you." Do we literally have to give away everything we own to become Christians? No, but we do have to be willing to forsake all... Saving faith is a commitment to leave sin and follow Jesus Christ at all costs. Jesus takes no one unwilling to come on those terms. p 87

Salvation is for those who are willing to forsake everything. p 78

A person not willing to turn from sin, possessions, false religion, or selfishness will find he cannot turn to Christ in faith. p 88

Thus in a sense we pay the ultimate price for salvation... It is total abandonment of self-will... And it denotes implicit obedience, full surrender to the Lordship of Christ. p 140

Does Lordship salvation proclaim the true gospel message? Here's what others have had to say on this matter:

William R. Newell—"to preach full surrender to an unsaved man as the way of salvation will just make a hateful Pharisee out of him."

Dr. Ironside—"When anyone comes promising salvation to those 'who make full surrender' of all that they have to God, and who 'pay the price of full salvation' he is preaching another gospel, for the price was paid on Calvary's cross and the work that saves is finished. It was Christ Jesus who made the full surrender when He yielded His life on Calvary that saves us, not our surrender in any way to Him."

Lance Latham — "Surely we must recognize WHO HE IS, or we will die in our sins (John 8:24). But this is vastly different from making Him your Lord in your life, in other words, promising to obey the rest of your life. This latter is preaching "works." His mercies, with all His graciousness to us, WILL LEAD us to making Him Lord, and that out of a heart of love and appreciation of Him. We feel that those who propose this way of salvation change the obvious meaning of Romans 10:9 to justify this. That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. This CANNOT be made to say, "make Him Lord of your life." Believing on Christ is distinctly not "turning the direction of your life over to Him." It is looking in faith to our Saviour crucified for

our sins on Calvary! It is not of works, devotion or full surrender. It is His work and His death that avails."

"The self-reliant man feels that he must add something to Calvary in order to be accepted by God. He must be either self-denying, quite sorry for his sins, determined to live differently, or "do something" to fix up all his past. However, we find in Scripture that salvation is "not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy," (Titus 3:5), "not of works, lest any man should boast" (Eph. 2:9). We cannot add a thing to Calvary as our hope... Therefore, we must not frustrate the grace of God by adding works to grace."

Let's see what Dr. MacArthur has to say about repentance:

JM: But the implication that people want to read into that is that if you have to do that, that's a work. That's a pre-salvation work that you have to do. And then they take repentance and they say, "we don't believe in repentance either." In other words, salvation is purely grace. You don't commit to anything and you don't repent from anything. And you say that repentance is in the Bible. Well, those people who are against Lordship salvation redefine repentance as changing your mind about who Jesus is. Or changing your mind about whether you can save yourself. But it does not mean turning from your sin, because if you had to turn from your sin, that would be a pre-salvation human work. Or if you had to submit to Christ and bow your knee to His Lordship, that would be a pre-salvation work.

Dr. MacArthur claims that the Grace position redefines repentance. But in actuality, it's John MacArthur who has redefined repentance.

Repent is made up of two words. *Meta* means *after* and implies *change*. *Noeô* means *perceive*. It comes from the noun *noûs* which means *mind*. The word *repent* literally means to change one's mind or perception.

The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament says it "means 'to change one's *noûs*,' ie., opinions, feelings, or purpose." Those who hold to the "grace position" essentially take this as being the basic meaning of *repent*.

Charles Ryrie: "Biblical repentance... involves changing one's mind in a way that affects some change in the person. Repentance is not merely an intellectual assent to something; it also includes a resultant change, usually in actions." "The only kind of repentance that saves is a change of mind about Jesus Christ. People can weep; people can resolve to turn from their past sins; but those things in themselves cannot save. The only kind of repentance that saves anyone, anywhere, anytime is a change of mind about Jesus Christ."

Lewis Sperry Chafer: "Repentance, which means 'a change of mind,' is never excluded from the terms of salvation; it is included as an essential part of believing. It is impossible for a person to believe who does not repent. In believing, he will experience that change of mind which turns from all else unto Christ as the Object of trust. Saving faith is more than a belief in historical facts concerning Christ; it is to rely on Christ, to depend on His saving grace, and to receive Him; it is to believe the record God has given concerning His Son."

Lordship salvation adds to the basic meaning of *repent* by saying that it includes a determination to forsake one's sins.

John MacArthur: repentance "implies a change of mind, and some who oppose lordship salvation limit its meaning to that. But a definition of repentance cannot be drawn solely from

the etymology of the Greek word. It is much more than a mere change of mind—it involves a complete change of heart, attitude, interest, and direction. As metanoia is used in the New Testament, it always speaks of a change of purpose, and specifically a turning from sin. Repentance is not merely being ashamed or sorry over sin, although genuine repentance always involves an element of remorse. It is a redirection of the human will, a purposeful decision to forsake all unrighteousness and pursue righteousness instead. A person not willing to turn from sin, possessions, false religion, or selfishness will find he cannot turn to Christ in faith. Salvation is for those who are willing to forsake everything.”

Lordship salvation adds to repentance the concept of determining to forsake sin in order to be saved. Not only must a person purpose to quit sinning, they must be willing to forsake everything in order to obtain this gift which is suppose to be free. This reminds me of the slick salesman who will give you a free gift if you just send in \$29.95 for a bottle of his miraculous cure-all snake oil.

Does repentance mean forsaking sin? According to the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament the change that occurs in repentance *“is not necessarily ethical; it may be from good to bad.”*

As an example of this Trench cites a passage from Plutarch in which two murderers, who, having spared a child, afterwards repented and tried to slay it.

If repent means turning from sin then in this context the sin would have been allowing the child to live.

Another example this change from good to bad is found in the writings of Josephus. Herod feared the influence of John the Baptist. Therefore...

He [Herod] thought the best course was to arrest him [John the Baptist] and put him to death before he caused a riot, rather than wait until a revolt broke out and then have to repent of permitting such trouble to arise. Because of this suspicion on Herod's part, John was... put to death.

Again if repent means turning from sin then the sin would have been to allow John to live.

In Septuagint the word *repent* was used with regard to God. If the basic meaning of the word *repent* carries with it the idea of forsaking sin, then how are we to apply this to God?

So it's obvious that the grace position has not tampered with the meaning of repentance. In actuality it's the Lordship salvation teachers who have changed the meaning of repentance. They've added a determination to stop sinning to the basic meaning of repent. Now they are faced with a dilemma. How can they say that promising to stop sinning is not adding works to the gospel of grace? Here's how John MacArthur tries to get around that insurmountable problem:

JM: The simple answer to that is... that it is regeneration. You couldn't repent if it were a pre-salvation human work and you couldn't submit to Christ if it were a pre-salvation human work. None of it is a pre-salvation human work. It is all encompassed in the redeeming work of God. It is all the work of God. God grants repentance. Paul said that to Timothy. God grants repentance. God grants submission. God breaks the human will. God terrorizes the soul over the results and implications of sin. And to take any less than that is nothing more than limiting God. Are you saying that God can save He just can't make people repent? Or God can save, He just

can't make them submissive? It strikes a blow against the power of God. It doesn't say anything about human works. I would never advocate that there is any component of human effort in salvation. It's all of God. Let's just not strip out what God is doing and say He's not doing it.

This statement sounds good, but I doubt if Dr. MacArthur really believes it!

The Word of God specifically says in Eph 2:1 And you were dead in your trespasses and sins ...

The next time you are at a funeral try telling the corpse to turn from his sin. Tell him to implicitly obey every command of Christ. What kind of response do you think that you will get? None!

Yet Dr. MacArthur would have us tell lost, unregenerate sinners who are dead in their trespasses and sins to do that very thing. He wants us to tell dead men to undertake a work that only God can do. If Dr. MacArthur actually believes that only God can do this work, then why doesn't he just let God do it? Why impose God's work upon dead human beings?

During this round table discussion John Ankerberg asked Dr. MacArthur to explain how a person can be born again. Dr. MacArthur's gospel presentation was quite revealing. Listen carefully to what he had to say:

God has commanded all men everywhere to repent, because He has ordained a day in which He will judge the world by that man whom He raised from the dead even Jesus Christ. There's forgiveness for sin for those who repent. It's as simple as a beggar coming and crying out for something. It's as simple as hungering and thirsting for a righteousness you desperately need, don't have and can't earn. It's pleading with a gracious God to give you the forgiveness of your sins, purely and simply because He wants to do it. It's a beggar's position. And if a person is overwrought with sin and feels the burden and weight of sin and the heart anguish of sin, come to God. Cry for mercy and God in His grace will reach out and by virtue of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ which satisfied His justice with regard to your sin grant you saving grace.

Here we see the elements of the gospel according to John MacArthur. The first requirement is repentance. And by John MacArthur's own definition repentance means a determination to stop sinning. The second requirement is to cry out like a beggar for forgiveness. No where in this invitation does Dr. MacArthur even suggest that the sinner must place his faith in the substitutionary work of Christ. He only tacks the sacrifice of Jesus on the end of his invitation. He says that if the sinner meets the two requirements of repentance and pleading for forgiveness then God is obligated to forgive him on the basis of Jesus death. According to this gospel presentation a person doesn't even have to know that Jesus died on the cross. All he has to do is promise to stop sinning and ask for forgiveness. In other words, you and I are wasting our time trying to bring the message of the gospel to those who have never heard. The lost heathen who knows nothing of Christ simply has to promise not to sin anymore and beg for forgiveness and God will save them. God is obligated to do this based on the sacrifice of Jesus whether this lost person places his faith in Christ or not.

This is not the gospel. The basic elements of the gospel according to the apostle Paul are the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Dr. MacArthur ignores these basic tenets of the gospel. The simplicity of faith is complicated by a message of works.

The true gospel message is so simple that a small child can understand it and be saved. Yet, Lordship salvation so complicates the gospel that it becomes next to impossible for a child to

believe. Even Dr. MacArthur himself has admitted this deplorable fact about Lordship salvation. In a taped message in 1990 Dr. MacArthur made the following statement:

Now let me say this, and I don't want you to panic when I say it. Saving faith is an adult issue. Saving faith is an adult experience. Saving faith is an adult decision. Am I saying that a child cannot be saved? I'm saying that salvation is a conscious turning from sin to follow Jesus Christ with an understanding of something of the sinfulness of sin, its consequences and something of who Jesus Christ is, what He has provided and that I'm committing my life to Him. At what point can a child understand that? I tell parents that salvation is an adult decision. There is no illustration in Scripture of childhood salvation. There is none. People want to throw in the Philippian jailer and his household; well, that's talking about his servants, so there is no reference there about his children. So there is no such thing as a childhood conversion.

The Lord Jesus taught that to be saved adults must become as little children. Yet Dr. MacArthur would have us believe that to be saved, little children must become adults. Let's not distort the message of the gospel of grace, lest we end up barring lost souls including little children from heaven.