

A Report on
Ashamed of the Gospel
by John F. MacArthur

Chapter 1 – Christianity on the Down-Grade

Being one who is likely re-entering the pastorate, I found a dose of needed reality in comments that suffering and hardship go hand-in-hand with ministry.

MacArthur holds preaching (prolonged pulpit exposition) as the unequivocal pivotal element of ministry. Yet, such an *absolute* demand seems biblically questionable. Even if Christ's longest recorded expositions competed in length with today's sermons, they composed a minority of His recorded ministry. Instead, Christ typically spoke in short, simple statements/parables, thereby enlightening the willing but hiding truth from the uninterested. Even His synagogue exposition – the setting nearest our own services – was not “preaching” by MacArthur's standard.

Chapter 2 – The User-Friendly Church

The listing of article clippings (pg. 47) help to better specify the problems for which MacArthur's dander has been raised. However, this chapter seems to carry the venom of one attacking both those adapting their methods as well as those altering their message. The author continues to take “user-friendliness” to task while apparently failing to see that such was a portion of the methodology used by the great apostle Paul himself. (See 1Cor. 9:19ff, esp. v. 22.)¹

Chapter 3 – Gimme That Show-Time Religion

MacArthur does well point out that pragmatism (I would say “misguided,” or better, “short-sighted” pragmatism) can focus on bringing in the unchurched to the detriment of adequately feeding the saints. His insights about the great potential for trivializing, obscuring, or even losing the message in the medium is certainly worthy of note.

He continues to find the potential for error (e.g., “marketing”) to be the near-equivalent of error itself, and assumes therein justification for removing the potential.

Chapter 4 – All Things to All People

Finally MacArthur addresses the Biblical issue that should add balance to his approach, or at least clarify his position. He does the latter, explaining that Paul believes the message is unchangeable, but the messenger should remove anything unnecessarily offensive to the culture he is ministering in. In short, “condescension” not “compromise.”

However, it seems this principle contradicts MacArthur's premise. If a group is unwilling to hear (e.g., offended by) prolonged sermons, and that message can be adequately covered in a compacted time (like Christ's sermons/teachings) or in another media (as Christ's parables) is that not condescending without compromising?

Chapter 5 – The Foolishness of God

The history behind the term *fundamentalist* – beginning with *The Fundamental* articles in the early 20th century, and subsequently the *fundamentalism* movement associated with those adhering to the beliefs promoted by those articles – was very interesting.

¹ With further reading I found out that MacArthur does later addresses this passage.

Referring to 1Cor. 1:21, MacArthur states the underlying idea is “plainly proclaiming the gospel,” yet [unjustifiably] discredits the same proclamation of the gospel via drama, music, and “subtler means” – in short, all forms other than the contemporary understanding of “preaching.”

Chapter 6 – The Power of God Unto Salvation

Referring to some measures I would consider “marketing,” MacArthur aptly states “Certainly every worthy preacher or evangelist will seek ways to stimulate people’s interest – but only to capture a hearing for the gospel.” His earlier discussion seemed contrary to this, but perhaps he simply failed to distinguish between those who use such means for the purpose of getting a hearing for the gospel from those that do so as a substitute for the gospel. If that was his intent – clouded thought it may be – then I find myself more in agreement with him that I originally thought.

Chapter 7 – Paul on Mars Hill

MacArthur gives an insightful history behind the altars and shrines “to an unknown God” (pp. 145-6).

Although deriding today’s preacher for using side-show antics to draw a crowd, MacArthur unwitting shows that Paul made use of such means as he went to the Agora – the market place which drew the crowds because of the side-show acts as well as its routine businesses. In fact, Paul’s hearing-upon-the-hill and the impact of it were the results of his taking advantage of the sideshow which brought in that crowd for him to preach to – a fact MacArthur failed to note.

Chapter 8 – The Sovereignty of God in Salvation

MacArthur’s definition of “foreknowledge” in terms of relationship (e.g., a man knowing his wife) is an interesting concept, and worthy of some serious pondering.

MacArthur holds that the elect – i.e., those appointed by God to salvation totally independent of any work, decision or other element on their part (MacArthur’s explanation) – “will certainly” be saved. Furthermore, that “certain” salvation is through divinely appointed means including repentance and faith. Thus, the elect “will certainly” repent and believe – they can’t avoid it. I am therefore left to conclude that MacArthur holds to some form of fatalism.²

Chapter 9 – I Will Build My Church

MacArthur points out some good principles to keep in mind relative to church growth. True church growth is at the prerogative of God. It can be nourished and encouraged, and elements thwarting growth removed. But we can’t engineer growth.

Another interesting insight worthy of some pondering in the future is MacArthur’s notation that the *gates* of hell (Matt. 16:19) is a reference not to an assault, but an imprisonment. *Hell* is itself a reference to the grave, not the eternal lake of fire. Thus, this passage, according to the author, is a promise of resurrection.

² Please see also my attached interaction with this chapter for what I consider to be a self-contradiction in MacArthur’s concept of sovereignty which underlies his discussion here.

Chapter 10 – Epilogue

Quoting Os Guinness, MacArthur states that the market-driven philosophy which is so prevalent among modern evangelicals in our day is actually nothing more than “a recycling of the error of classical liberalism.”

MacArthur also notes the sad yet unsurprising fact that, “Unfortunately, real discernment is in short supply among modern evangelicals.”

Appendix 1 & 2

Found in the first appendix is a very interesting and enlightening history of the Down-Grade controversy.

The second contains a survey of Charles Finney’s ministry that was insightful yet disappointing. To find that such a gifted man stirred so much dust yet plowed so little ground is a sobering realization that the impact of my own ministry is not as accurately measured by those who walk the aisle following today’s message as it is by those still walking with Christ as a result of yesterday’s labor.

Ashamed of the Gospel
Some Problems Addressed

“Methinks thou doth protest too much,” was my response through much of the earlier portions of this book. MacArthur’s approach of addressing ‘error-at-large’ in the first chapter without giving specific examples put me at odds with him upon issues that with more specific information I might agree with him. For example, His general condemnation of pragmatism was at best unconvincing. God is pragmatic – He provided an Offering that would be without meaning if it did not work and a Bible that is very practical in its every instruction. So, to condemn pragmatism at large is seemingly also a condemnation of God’s workings. While the point that he would like to make may be largely true, his arguments against this, worldliness and other matters were in great need of specification. And his line of reasoning – that ‘we shouldn’t be guilty of using that which the world uses’ – would equally rule out indoor plumbing and central heating.

While granting that some probably misuse the principles and procedures of church growth, etc., in the early part of the book I concluded that if this is the best argument to be made against these methods, then there is no reason I should object to them. So I was led to wonder if the author might have an agenda of his own – be it blinded rage at some misuse of pragmatism or other methodology, or simply a desire for history to hold him as next in the lineage with Spurgeon, Tozer and other such “stalwarts of the faith.”

However, in the course of completing the book I came to a better understanding of MacArthur’s approach, and the reasons behind it. It seems clear that MacArthur has the spiritual gift of prophecy, and that gift is often noted for two things (among others):

1. Viewing all things in the extremes of black or white; and
2. Painting with broad strokes – i.e., making sweeping statements that are generally true without noticing (or even caring) that it is not equally applicable to all the specific situations within that general area.

Upon a little reflection I found many of my objections to be explained by this.

But please don’t misread “excusable” into “explainable,” for I still feel the natural tendencies outlined above should not be allowed to run as freely as the author has done in this book. His generalities, in my opinion, ranged from confusing to inexcusable. He regularly condemned both those adapting their methodology along with those abandoning their message in his sweeping condemnation of marketing the church, pragmatism, etc.

Maybe it’s due to such broad strokes of the prophet, but the author seemed at times to argue against his own interpretation of scripture. Referring to 1Cor. 1:21 (chap. 5), he states that the underlying idea of the verse is that of “plainly proclaiming the gospel.” Yet, he then attempts to discredit the proclamation of the gospel in specific ways (drama, music, and “subtler means” – in short, all forms other than the contemporary understanding of “preaching.”) Proclamation is not equal to proclamation, so his reasoning seemingly concludes.

MacArthur apparently assumes the contemporary concept of a protracted sermon to be the only equivalent of the term “preaching” as found in the NT. However, the latter is simply “that which is proclaimed by a herald” (Thayer), but doesn’t necessarily have to be the protracted message of a preacher. (Jonah’s ultra-brief message (“preaching” Luke 11:32) to Nineveh, would hardly qualify for MacArthur’s definition of “preaching.”) One can also make such a proclamation via poetry and songs (e.g., the Psalms), drama (proclamation set to an acted-out scenario), or illustration (e.g., parables).

It's not that I'm opposed to the idea of the protracted sermon as we know it today. But I am opposed to what seems to be an unbiblical demand that such is the only valid method of proclaiming the gospel.

In my opinion, even the broad strokes of the prophet are insufficient justification for the excessive badgering by the author in portions of chapter six. Note a couple of specific statements: "Preachers who concern themselves with user-friendliness cannot fearlessly proclaim the whole counsel of God. Those who aspire to preach a timely message will find themselves at odds with the timeless truth of the Bible." MacArthur would be hard-pressed to be more self-contradictory than this last statement, for any message based upon the timeless truth is as timely as "tomorrow's newspaper" as the old preacher said. While I understand his intentions, in my opinion the constant overstating of his point is insensitive, inaccurate, and inexcusable.

But over-generalization is not the only difficulty noted in this book. I find other points of disagreement with the author's thinking that are worthy of note.

MacArthur contrasts contemporary preachers who (he claims) hide the gospel in drama and skits against Paul's boldness to proclaim the gospel (presuming he knows exactly how Paul made such proclamation, I suppose). However, he fails to note that Paul apparently had little difficulty getting a hearing – even from his critics. Today's preacher is not likely to be stoned, for without a measure of adapting their methodologies many are not likely to have enough critics present to raise objections, let alone pick up stones.

In chapter eight MacArthur goes to great lengths in an attempt to establish the legitimacy of Calvinism under the label of God's sovereignty. Although attesting that the elect are obligated to believe, he states that such belief was never an influencing element on God's sovereignty in choosing the person as one of His elect. He later states that the absence of miracles performed by Christ while in Nazareth (Luke 4) was also due to God's sovereign choice. However, on a subsequent visit to the same city (Matt. 13:58), the absence of miracles (i.e., a sovereign choice of God according to MacArthur) is attributed to the people's unbelief. Thus, one *must* conclude that God's timeless sovereignty was influenced – albeit, by His own allowing of it – by the level of the people's faith. If such influence is possible in the sovereignty of His miracles, why presume it inapplicable to His greatest miracle of all – man's salvation? MacArthur thus himself exposes the foundation of straw upon which is precariously built his conclusion that God's sovereignty in man's salvation allows no room for man's influence.

With much of the premise of this book built upon the Down-Grade theory, I feel it necessary to address a couple of matters relative to the discussion of that theory. The explanation in Appendix 1 of Shindler's approach in his research shows a great potential – yea, a predisposition – for human error. The book states, "Shindler noted a correlation between Calvinistic doctrine and a high view of Scripture...." However, we must ask by what measure Shindler determined "a high view of Scripture." One judges the validity of another's view based upon his own. Thus one with a small bias in *this* direction will subjectively judge as most valid those that hold an identical bias. Another with a large bias in *that* direction will do the same, based upon his own bias. Thus, Shindler, who apparently held a strong Calvinistic bias, would give highest marks to those nearest to his own bias. Therefore, it is not unexpected that he should find a high correlation between churches subjectively judged by him as having "a high view of Scripture" and those with strong Calvinistic leanings. Thus his subjective-based conclusion that Calvinism and church soundness are co-related should be held as highly questionable.

My perspective on the potential for “down-grade” differs somewhat from that held by Shindler and Spurgeon, for I hold that there is a down-grade on ether side of truth. Truth is not so much on the opposite end of the spectrum from error, but is instead the center from which one may descend to error either to the right or to the left. Shindler and Spurgeon noted a regular cycle in the churches between Calvinism and Arminianism and explained it as the regular ascension and decline between right and wrong. However, an equally acceptable – if not preferable – explanation is this flux was an attempt to ascend the peak from the one side (Arminianism) only to be carried on a down-grade to the other side (Calvinism), then to repeat the procedure going in the opposite direction.¹

As I draw this response to a conclusion and review my work, I find that I in fact may be guilty of that which I condemn in MacArthur. My intent has been to simply point out some problem areas within this book, but in doing so it may easily appear that I, too, have thrown the baby out with the bath water. I must therefore step back, and from a broader viewpoint note that MacArthur has many good points in his book. And in spite of the collateral damage of his generalizations, he is to be highly commended for rebuking the truly guilty and making the rest of us aware of the serious issue of those who have in fact abandoned their message for that which is not another gospel.

Don Burke
February 19, 2004

¹ The truth is, I personally feel this two-directional down-grade described here is instead more of a three-dimensional spire in which one is able to down-grade in any number of planes, drifting from the truth either to the one side or to the other.