

SOTERIOLOGY: DOCTRINE OF SALVATION

PART 65

1 JOHN: RELATIONSHIP OR FELLOWSHIP? PART 4

Test # 10: Can you discern between spiritual truth and error? This is based on 1 John 4:1-3.

1 John 4:1–6 ¹Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. ²By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; ³and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; this is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world. ⁴You are from God, little children, and have overcome them; because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world. ⁵They are from the world; therefore they speak as from the world, and the world listens to them. ⁶We are from God; he who knows God listens to us; he who is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.

MacArthur makes the claim that anyone who departs from Christianity and falls prey to some false teachings about Christ has proven they were never saved in the first place. This is so ironic that if it weren't so tragic, it would be funny. MacArthur propagates a faith plus works gospel which denies grace and millions of people have been deceived into following him. By his own words, all the people who follow his teaching cannot be born again because they have been deceived in some manner about the person and work of Christ Jesus. "Can you tell when someone is presenting false teaching about the person and work of Christ? That is the watershed issue of the Christian faith....John was saying a true believer will listen to the truth and not deviate into error about Christ's glorious person and work. Suppose someone says, 'I used to believe in Jesus Christ, but now I've seen the light: Christ really was an angelic being—or an emanation from God, a divine spirit without the human element, or just a man and not divine.' Any such heresies reflect an unregenerate heart....True believers know truth from error because the Spirit of Truth indwells them...." [John MacArthur, *Saved Without a Doubt: How to be Sure of Your Salvation*, pp. 87-88]. He is saying that a truly born again person cannot be deceived but the Scriptures say otherwise. Hymenaeus and Alexander are prime examples of born again men who departed from a sound doctrinal faith for something else. Whether the something else was sin or submitting to false doctrine or teaching false doctrine, we aren't specifically told. Paul seems to be telling Timothy to guard himself against falling into the same trap. If Paul thought Timothy could possibly fall into this, then isn't it possible that other born again people could fall into it?

1 Timothy 1:18–20 ¹⁸This command I entrust to you, Timothy, my son, in accordance with the prophecies previously made concerning you, that by them you fight the good fight, ¹⁹keeping faith and a good conscience, which some have rejected and suffered shipwreck in regard to their faith. ²⁰Among these are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan, so that they will be taught not to blaspheme.

“Believers need to take precautions or they will find themselves drowning spiritually. Today many people say that doctrine should not divide believers. But this contrasts with what Paul says in v 18 and [earlier] in vv 3-7. The word charge occurs in both v 5 and v 18. Paul is commanding Timothy to wage [lit., ‘make war’] the good warfare against false teachers and false doctrine. Doctrine is vitally important. It is called the Christian *faith* for a reason. God has given a body of doctrines that Christians are to believe. Abandoning sound doctrine hurts the church. If one wishes to have a good conscience, then he must believe the right things. A good conscience starts with believing what God says. To believe things contrary to the doctrine God has given is *unbelief*, not faith. A good conscience does not mean feeling good about oneself. A person who is a false teacher might feel fine. A truly good conscience is possessed by one that believes (and applies) true doctrine. If a person rejects sound doctrine, then he suffers shipwreck. Bad beliefs put one’s spiritual life on the rocks. Beliefs matter very much. To cease believing in the gospel, for example, results in loss of assurance of salvation. Spiritual lethargy or legalistic striving may easily result [hello Puritans and Lordship salvation advocates!]. Believing sound doctrine is vital. Reject sound doctrine and one’s spiritual life is going to end up in shipwreck on the rocks of bad doctrine....Paul says these two men he delivered to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme. (cf. 1 Cor. 5:5). Paul never delivered unbelievers to Satan [Why would He? Satan already has them in his camp.]. Note that the purpose here is constructive: *that they may learn (paideuo, a word that was used of child training) not to blaspheme*. God often gives false teachers the opportunity to repent rather than simply taking their lives immediately” [Robert N. Wilkin, “1 Timothy” in *The Grace New Testament Commentary*, 2:966].

Later in the same letter, Paul told Timothy that born again believers can depart from the faith because they develop a love of money.

1 Timothy 6:10 ¹⁰For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

Paul then counseled Timothy to flee from these things including those teaching false doctrine (vv. 3-5). If false doctrine is not a threat to those who believe, why is Paul with such conviction warning Timothy against falling for it? He is doing it because the danger

to believers is very real; they can and do depart from the faith by heeding those who preach and teach false doctrine.

1 Timothy 6:11 ¹¹But flee from these things, you man of God, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance and gentleness.

It seems to be rather self-evident that people who fall for doctrinal error are not in a position to use that as a gauge to determine whether or not they are saved. If they believe the error, they think they have the truth; therefore, they cannot reach a reasonable conclusion concerning whether or not they can “discern between spiritual truth and error” as MacArthur puts it. Everyone who believes MacArthur’s false gospel of Lordship salvation through faith plus works thinks they have the truth but they have believed the lie. Believing the lie really means you are incapable of determining the truth and that cannot be used to prove salvation.

Concerning 1 John 4:1-6, “...the apostle identifies with his readers. It’s not a we versus you contrast. The we and the you combine into one group against *them*. It wouldn’t even be necessary to mention these obvious facts if there weren’t so many preachers and commentaries of the Reformed persuasion out there who will tell us that John is writing to a mixed audience of believers and unbelievers so they can figure out who are the sheep and who are the goats. That kind of introspection was a Puritan preoccupation. John Owen wrote a 650-page book just to help his readers look within to figure out if they were elect or not [John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, 16 vols., vol. 3: *A Discourse Concerning the Holy Spirit*, esp. pp. 45-47, 226-228]. The NT teaches preoccupation with Christ, not with yourself. As long as I focus on myself, there will always be doubts. When I focus on Jesus, the doubts disappear” [David R. Anderson, *Maximum Joy: First John—Relationship or Fellowship?*, p. 189].

Hodges had an interesting and very true observation concerning the deceitful methods used by false teachers. Frequently, the messages preached and taught by false teachers will be notable and decidedly heretical for what they do not say as opposed to what they do say. The reason for that is very simple. If Satan can’t prevent justification salvation in people in the beginning, then his fallback position is to lead Christians away from the truth and destroy their ability to glorify the Lord with biblical truth. “It is noteworthy that John does *not* say every spirit that *denies*, but rather every spirit that *does not* confess. Heretical teaching can mask the full extent of its deviation from the truth by simply failing to affirm some pivotal biblical truth. This is often done to make its false doctrine more palatable to the Christian audience it seeks to reach. But, says John, even the failure to *confess* Jesus as Christ come in the flesh is a clear indication that the religious outlook in question is not of God. If a religious leader or movement cannot speak loud and clear about the fundamental Christological and

soteriological truth that Jesus is the Christ, then that leader or movement does not have its source, or dynamic, in God" [Zane C. Hodges, *The Epistles of John: Walking in the Light of God's Love*, p. 178]. These people don't always target unbelievers; they seek to divert believers from the truth. "But it should always be remembered, whatever the level of our spiritual growth, that we are not, in and of ourselves, immune to false doctrine and satanic deception. If we have victory at all it is because the Holy Spirit within us is mightier than the Archdeceiver, and we must rely on Him to keep us cleaving to God's truth" [Zane C. Hodges, *The Epistles of John: Walking in the Light of God's*, p. 179].

MacArthur said what sounds like the same thing but there is a distinct difference between what these two men mean by it. MacArthur claims the indwelling Spirit is a guarantee you will not and cannot be deceived by false teachers irrespective of what you know of sound doctrine. He is saying that simply by virtue of the indwelling Spirit, the believer cannot be deceived. Hodges says you can be deceived but you must actively rely on the Holy Spirit to hang on to God's truth which is the revealed Word of God. We do that by knowing the Word of God and the sound doctrine contained therein. Hodges recognizes that born again people can fall prey to false teachers if they don't know, or neglect, or reject some facet of revealed truth. MacArthur says when that happens the person is proving they are unsaved. Even though both men were saying what was seemingly the same thing they mean different things by it. We have to carefully read things in order to ascertain exactly what is being said. We have to listen to what is said and confirm or deny it by the truth of the Word of God.

Again, this doctrine creates more questions and causes more problems than it solves. How many new believers fall prey to false teachers? For that matter, how many people who have been believers for years fall prey to false teachers? Does that mean they are unsaved? How many new believers know the Bible well enough to discern truth from error? How long must they be Christians to be able to discern truth from error or otherwise prove they are unsaved after some period of time? How many believers have tried to grow and mature by turning to so-called "Christian" television and fallen prey to the heretics preaching a false Christ in the Word of Faith charismatic movement that has saturated television? Our churches are riddled with people who don't know the Scriptures well enough to discern truth from error, sound teachers from heretics. Are they unsaved because they don't know what they don't know? How many Christians are so familiar with the Word of God that they are never in danger of falling prey to false doctrine? Some are and I hope there are more than I think there are, but that doesn't make those who are not Bible scholars unsaved. Are the Christians who invite into their churches and participate in so-called "Christian" yoga and other Eastern religious practices unsaved? They are ignorant and they may be in spiritual danger, but they aren't unsaved assuming they are born again to begin with.

Test # 11: Have you suffered rejection because of your faith? This is based on 1 John 3:13.

1 John 3:13 ¹³Do not be surprised, brethren, if the world hates you.

This is nothing new; Jesus warned the disciples of this and Paul counseled Timothy concerning this truth. The world hates believers. We should expect that.

John 15:18–19 ¹⁸“If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. ¹⁹“If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you.

2 Timothy 3:12 ¹²Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

MacArthur misinterprets this Scripture as well. It is not unsurprising when the unbelieving, kosmos world hates believers, but that isn't the context here in 1 John 3:13. It is about love within the brotherhood. In other words, Christians who hate or harm other Christians are not exhibiting familial fellowship. But MacArthur says, “Have you experienced animosity, hostility, rejection, bitterness, alienation, ostracism, prejudice, or outright persecution from representing and advocating what is right? If so, that's a sign that you belong to One who suffered the same way for the same reason” [John MacArthur, *Saved Without a Doubt: How to be Sure of Your Salvation* p. 89]. What if you live in a time and a place where persecution and hatred of Christians isn't in order? That's been the case for much of America's history. Does that mean that all the Christians who lived in America absent persecution for their faith were unsaved? To this point in my life, I've never personally been persecuted for my faith; does that mean I'm unsaved? The test he presents is simply absurd and false on its face. All of this is now changing in America, but that doesn't make his test any more valid today than it was less valid yesterday. It is simply invalid from the beginning.

“John's exhortation is that we love one another. Why is this a barrier between us and God? Or why is it so hard to love our brother? Could it be that our brother has more potential than the world to hurt us? Might it be that we expect evil from the world, but not from our Christian brother? It hurts when a Christian brother does us wrong. It hurts deeply. And we go out of our way to avoid pain....Cain and Abel had a genuine relationship of brotherhood. It was physical, all right, but the parallel John is drawing is brotherhood. One brother is having problems with another brother. Cain killed his brother out of envy. Are Christians capable of murder and envy? Of course they are. Otherwise we wouldn't have passages like 1 Pet 4:15 ('Let none of you suffer as a murderer, a thief, an evil doer...') and Jas 3:14; 4:2 ('You murder and covet and cannot

obtain.¹) These verses are sure a waste of inspired text if they don't refer to Christians" [David R. Anderson, *Maximum Joy: First John—Relationship or Fellowship?*, pp. 164-165].

1 Peter 4:15 ¹⁵Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler;

James 3:14 ¹⁴But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth.

James 4:2 ²You lust and do not have; so you commit murder. You are envious and cannot obtain; so you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask.

Is it possible for born again people, members of the body of Christ, to be murderers or thieves or to be envious and jealous and engaging in strife? If the Scriptures are true, which, of course, they are, it certainly is possible. But would MacArthur affirm that? He would not! Here's what MacArthur has to say concerning James 4:2. "These are between people in the church. *Wars* speaks of conflict in general; *fight*s of its specific manifestations. Discord in the church is not by God's design, but results from the mix of tares (false believers) and wheat (truly redeemed people) that make up the church.... The passionate desires [lust in the NASB] for worldly pleasures that mark unbelievers are the internal source of the external conflict in the church....Unbelievers (who are in view here) fight (unsuccessfully) against the evil desires they cannot control" [John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*, p. 1891]. It is obvious that his Lordship salvation theology has seriously affected his interpretation of this verse. Because he doesn't believe Christians can act this way, he has to make these people unbelievers. The point is hatred can exist within the body among believers in addition to the body being subject to hatred from the world. MacArthur makes "advocating what is right" the standard for proving one's status as a believer. Can't unbelievers advocate for what is morally correct as well? In fact, right now one of the major claims of atheism in their attacks on Christianity is that they are moral people too. In other words, people don't need God in order to be moral and virtuous members of society. That isn't an appropriate standard. I assume MacArthur was referring to advocating biblical truth when he said "advocating for what is right" but that isn't what he said.

MacArthur's tests fail to prove anyone is a believer. In fact, anyone attempting to subject themselves to these tests must come away more confused about their salvation than ever. Isn't it better to subject one's self to the only true, objective standard that gives total and complete certainty to faith which is the Word of God?

The only test one must meet in order to determine relationship is something like this: Saving faith is the belief in Jesus Christ as the Son of God who died and rose again to

pay one's personal penalty for sin and the One who gives eternal life to all who trust Him and Him alone for it.

Lordship salvation and Free Grace theology. I've used the term "Lordship salvation" a lot throughout the course of this class so I want to define it and the issue it represents. This controversy has led to churches like ours identifying ourselves as "Free Grace." We shouldn't have to do that because that's the gospel, but the truth of the gospel, between Roman Catholicism, Lutheranism, and Calvinism, has been so adulterated by a faith plus works theology that we have to differentiate ourselves in this way. That's why there are two new seminaries in this country that specifically identify themselves as Free Grace seminaries. One is The Grace School of Theology in The Woodlands, Texas, and the other is Grace Biblical Seminary in McDonough, Georgia. The debate has also resulted in the formation of the Grace Evangelical Society and the Free Grace Alliance. In a way, this is nothing new. Puritan New England had an antinomian controversy from 1636 to 1638 involving a woman named Anne Hutchinson, a Congregational Church pastor named John Cotton who supported her, and the Puritan Reformed establishment of the time. The antinomian charge is interconnected with Free Grace theology. One man who investigated this controversy reached this conclusion. "[It is evident that the Lordship position evolved out of covenant theology. This leads to the question of whether dispensational Lordship advocates [a position held by MacArthur in regards to Israel but generally his theology is Reformed] find themselves in the odd place of holding a soteriology that is at odds with their eschatology....[I]f assurance is a product of Scripture (specifically of the promises in Scripture of everlasting life to all who believe in Jesus Christ), how should we evaluate a theology which claims that the promises of Scripture are insufficient? Lordship theologians are asserting that the promises of Scripture are inadequate for producing certain knowledge of the believer's final state. Such a view devalues the power and scope of God's promises, focusing instead on some inner, subjective experience or feeling, as well as an outer, subjective evidence of good works" [L. E. Brown, "Colonial America's Rejection of Free Grace Theology" in *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society*, 20, no. 38, p. 63].

The basic premise of Lordship salvation is that a person must not only believe in the person and the work of Christ Jesus, but one must also make Him Lord of your life. That entails living a life of obedience, faithfulness, and holy living without which one is proving that only a profession of faith was made apart from any real belief that saves. It is simply the Calvinist doctrine of the perseverance of the saints with a different name attached to it.

In the early twentieth century, Lewis Sperry Chafer had a war of words with Benjamin Warfield over the doctrine of grace. More recently, MacArthur wrote a book in 1988 entitled *The Gospel According to Jesus* that presented his concept of Lordship salvation

and it was answered in 1989 by Zane Hodges in his book *Absolutely Free: A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation*. In the early 1990s, Charles Bing wrote his doctoral dissertation at Dallas Theological Seminary entitled *Lordship Salvation: A Biblical Evaluation and Response*.

There are several reasons MacArthur came to this position. One is he misinterprets the gospels as truth directly for the church and in particular the book of Matthew. Two, he had his pastoral sensibilities hurt when people he had led to the Lord committed personal sins or left the faith. Third, he was shocked that popular Christian teachers of the time had fallen in scandal. Finally, he took a sabbatical to study Puritanism and when he returned from that his Lordship salvation theology had fully developed. "MacArthur has not always held to Lordship Salvation. The reason that the first edition of *The Gospel According to Jesus* (TGAJ) was not published before 1988 is because he did not embrace this view until 1980. At that time, MacArthur went on a sabbatical and studied the Puritans, the English branch of Calvinism" [Robert N. Wilkin, *A Gospel of Doubt: The Legacy of John MacArthur's The Gospel According to Jesus*, p. 12]. He has, at various times, labeled the gospel of grace alone through faith alone as "cheap grace," "easy-believism," or as a "no Lordship gospel."

"The gospel in vogue today [referring to the gospel of grace alone] holds forth a false hope to sinners. It promises them they can have eternal life yet continue to live in rebellion against God. Indeed, it encourages people to claim Jesus as Savior yet defer until later the commitment to obey him as Lord. It promises salvation from hell but not necessarily freedom from iniquity. It offers false security to people who revel in the sins of the flesh and spurn the way of holiness. By separating faith from faithfulness, it teaches that intellectual assent is as valid as wholehearted obedience to the truth. Thus the good news of Christ has given way to the bad news of an insidious easy-believism that makes no moral demands on the lives of sinners. It is not the same message Jesus proclaimed. This new gospel has spawned a generation of professing Christians whose behavior is indistinguishable from the rebellion of unregenerate....The church's witness to the world has been sacrificed on the altar of cheap grace....They [meaning professing believers who live sinful lives] have been told that the only criterion for salvation is knowing and believing some basic facts about Christ. They hear from the beginning that obedience is optional. It follows logically, then, that someone's one-time profession of faith is more valid than the evidence of that person's ongoing lifestyle in determining whether to embrace him or her as a true believer" [John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The Gospel According to Jesus* (1994 rev. ed.), pp. xx-xxiii].

MacArthur has a habit of setting up straw man arguments in which he falsely claims to state something he says we teach and then he knocks down that straw man instead of talking about what we actually teach. He claims that we "encourage" people to

believe in Jesus and defer until later making him Lord. That's untrue. We don't bring up making Him Lord because it is not part of the gospel and we don't encourage people to delay following Him. The issue once a person believes isn't Lordship anyway; it's discipleship. Another straw man argument he makes is that behavior is a specific indicator for determining whether or not a person has been justified. That's where he gets the dismissive term "professing believer." Behavior is an indication of discipleship; it is not an indication of justification. Another straw man example is this idea that we tell people that obedience is optional. Who tells an unbeliever they are trying to evangelize that? No one that I know of says that.

This is really nothing more than normative Calvinistic doctrine that commenced when Beza became Calvin's successor. Here is an example. "The doctrine of justification by faith is one of the most majestic and comforting doctrines in the Scriptures, but it never appears alone in the life of the Christian. The work of progressive sanctification, a grace of equal beauty, always accompanies it. Through justification, the believer is once for all declared clean before the throne of God from guilt and condemnation of every moral filth and idolatry. In addition, the righteousness of Christ is imputed to him so that he becomes the very righteousness of God. However, through the continuing and progressive work of sanctification, the justified believer is gradually transformed into the likeness of Christ. By means of divine providence and the ministry of the Spirit and the Word, God progressively cleanses the believer of the filth that clings to him and destroys the idols in his life that challenge God's supremacy and compete for his loyalty. God's work of justification in our lives is a finished work: there is nothing left to be completed and nothing that can be added to it. However, God's work of sanctification in our lives is an ongoing and progressive work that will not be completed until we stand before Him in glory. Again, justification and sanctification are always found together. Justification makes sanctification possible, and sanctification is the evidence that we have been justified" [Paul Washer, *The Gospel Call & True Conversion*, p. 89].

The basic problem for Lordship salvation is that it is a false gospel of faith plus works. No one can be justified without making Jesus Lord and living an obedient, faithful, mostly sin free life. This is simply a new twist on the faulty Calvinist doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. It is a massive infusion of sanctification into the moment of justification. It is unbiblical and it is not the way of eternal life.