

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

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We would like to begin by stating that we are in basic agreement with the thesis of MacArthur's paper. We understand this thesis to be that genuine faith is obedient faith that is inevitably effective in producing evidential works of faith in the believer's life. Although primarily expositional of certain portions of James, the paper seems intended as a contribution to the current debate among evangelicals concerning what is usually described as the "lordship salvation" question. Our response will therefore focus primarily on that issue.

Before turning to that, however, we would like to refer randomly to a few questionable points in the paper. First, in relation to the nature of faith it was argued against some of the advocates of nonlordship salvation that the nature of faith in Christ for salvation is "substantially different in character from everyday varieties of faith." Without denying some difference, the distinctions noted in the paper—namely, that saving faith deals with "spiritual reality invisible to the eye of flesh" and, secondly, it requires divine enablement—do not seem to point to a real, essential difference in the nature of faith itself. It could be argued that the examples of faith proposed by some of the nonlordship advocates as analogous to saving faith—for example, faith in the integrity of the President or trust in the quality of the water we drink—do in fact involve belief or trust in reality "invisible to the eye of flesh," and even "spiritual reality" in some instances. The source of enablement of faith also does not seem to necessitate a change in its very nature. Saying that saving faith is only through the empowerment of the Spirit certainly says something about its difficulty or its natural impossibility, but it does not in itself say anything about the essential nature of the faith itself. In our opinion the distinctions noted may point to some difference in degree, but more evidence would be needed to show a substantial difference.

A second point deals with the reference to Michael Cocoris' discussion of faith involving action. Cocoris is cited as explaining genuine saving faith with illustrations such as the truck driver's faith in the safety of a bridge, which is said to be not genuine belief in the Biblical sense until he

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drives onto the bridge. These kinds of illustrations are used to argue that even advocates of the nonlordship position find it difficult to explain faith without works. But these examples of the actions of genuine faith do not seem to be equivalent to the “works” related to faith in James. In James we understand “works” to be the result or fruit of faith, which appears to be the primary understanding throughout MacArthur’s paper. In the examples, however, it seems that Cocoris is desiring to explain what is inherent within saving faith itself. The action of the truck driver committing himself to the bridge is not the work or effect of faith. It is part of faith itself. Traditional interpretations of the relation of “faith” and “works” in James have never attempted to merge James’ “works” together with “faith” so that the “works” are part of justifying faith. Rather, they have been careful to distinguish them, making faith alone the justifying cause and works the inevitable fruit of a genuine living faith. In our opinion Cocoris’ explanation of the actions of saving faith ought not to be interpreted as directly analogous to the teaching of James. Rather, they are an attempt to explain the essence of saving faith as an actual dependence or trust in addition to a mental assent to the facts of the gospel. As is evident from the current debate, the rightful inclusion of the element of personal trust or dependence in saving faith that Cocoris illustrates does not yet get to the heart of the controversy.

In passing, it might also be noted that it is difficult for us to see Jas 2:24 (“a man is justified by works, and not by faith alone”) as “a literary device, a metonymy of effect for cause.” Nor does it seem that the citation of Calvin’s understanding of this verse supported this meaning. Rather, with many interpreters Calvin seems to take the concept of justification here to mean not the judicial declaration of righteousness but rather the demonstration or proving of righteousness. As we know, the exact meaning of this statement has evoked considerable explanation, but it is not central to the lordship controversy since none involved desire to include works as the ground of justification.

A final minor point that we would like to mention concerns the interpretation of v. 26, in which James uses the relationship between the body and spirit as an analogy between faith and works. MacArthur seems to see the point of the analogy in the animating forces, drawing the conclusion that here James “pictures works as the invigorating force and faith as the body.” While there is no question that spirit animates the body, in our opinion it is doubtful that this is the point of the analogy. James is hardly saying that works are the animating principle of faith. Rather, as is noted throughout the paper, works are the product of a living faith. The comparison in v. 26 is therefore not between what animates the other but between things that are similarly evidential. As spirit in a body gives evidence that the body is alive, so works give evidence that faith is alive. To phrase it differently: If the body gives no evidence of spirit or the life principle it is judged dead. Likewise if faith gives no evidence of works it is dead.

Now with regard to the primary issue of the paper we concur with MacArthur that the central theological issue that must be addressed in the present lordship controversy is the nature of saving faith. We would also state our hearty agreement, along with the history of the interpretation of this passage, that James is talking about the nature of faith in relation to spiritual salvation and not some sort of salvation concerned only with temporal life. The belief of the demons, which is set in contrast to true faith, makes this patently evident, in our opinion (cf. 2:19-20). Surely the demonic faith is used to illustrate a nonsaving faith in the spiritual, eternal sense and not a lesser faith that loses some temporal benefits.

Why faith need not be analyzed Biblically, even in terms of intellect, emotion and will, as one opponent of the lordship position suggests, is difficult to comprehend. A study of the Biblical concept of "heart" clearly leads us to these three elements, and it is finally belief from the heart that is saving according to Scripture. The meaning of faith—like other Biblical concepts, such as "knowing" and even the heart itself—is not patently evident to all modern readers of Scripture. The centrality of faith in the relationship of mankind to God makes it mandatory that we understand its nature as fully as possible.

In this connection we would like to suggest that the discussion of lordship salvation would be greatly enhanced if two issues, which always seem to be involved in the lordship conversation, would be separated. These are (1) the question of the nature of saving faith and (2) the question concerning the actual content or statement of the gospel presentation—that is, what we must say to a person in order for them to be saved. As we have listened to the discussion, it seems that these two issues are often confused. Frequently one person is talking about one of these issues while the other is responding in terms of the other. More often than not, the nonlordship advocates are talking about the content of the gospel message, while the lordship proponents are discussing the Biblical definition of faith. From the gospel record of Jesus it seems evident that the actual expression of the gospel message and its requirement on individuals differed somewhat according to the situation. This is evident in a comparison of Jesus' conversations with the Samaritan woman (John 4) and with the rich young ruler (Luke 18). But the nature of the faith required obviously was the same in each instance, for there cannot be different ways of salvation. At any rate much progress could be made if we recognized the two issues as related but distinct.

As regards the nature of faith set forth by MacArthur, we concur completely that it is a faith that works expressing itself in the life of the believer. How much expression is demanded, which is a question always raised by those opposed to the lordship position, is difficult to answer precisely and is beyond the scope of this response. Suffice it to say that the Biblical principle, "Out of the heart flow the issues of life" (Prov 4:23), which was clearly confirmed in the teaching of Jesus (cf. Matt 15:19; Luke

6:45), must be applied to this discussion. The possession of saving faith is related to the new covenant gift of a new heart that therefore demands new issues. If the life is not changed, it is Biblically impossible to believe that there has genuinely been a renewal of heart.

It should be noted in conclusion, however, that the analysis of saving faith as one that works does not finally solve the controversy of lordship. It is evident from references in MacArthur's presentation that there are many who concur with this understanding of James 2 (e.g. C. C. Ryrie). Some are even willing to relate this connection of faith and works to the question of the assurance of salvation (e.g. J. Walvoord and W. Wiersbe), but they are at the same time adamantly against so-called "lordship salvation."

It is important for us to recognize that there are in reality three rather distinct positions on this issue when they are analyzed theologically. The earlier nonlordship position represented by traditional dispensationalism accepted the interpretation of James 2 set forth in this paper: A non-working faith is a nonsaving faith. But it rejected the lordship interpretation of the gospel message and its human requirement. In recent years many have come to see this position as involving a basic inconsistency and have sought to resolve it. Some of the more radical proponents of nonlordship saving faith have sought this consistency by denying any necessary connection between faith and works in salvation. This involves the denial of the traditional interpretation of James 2. For them works are an obligatory aspect of salvation, but not a necessary part. On the other side the lordship position seeks consistency by demanding some connection between the necessary relation of works, as the fruit of faith seen in James, with the initial saving faith itself.

Since we find ourselves with this latter group, we would suggest that the nature of saving faith requires further elaboration beyond pointing out that it must inevitably produce fruit. Many will acknowledge this truth but at the same time charge the lordship position with "confusing the fruit with the root." They are in perfect agreement that the root of true faith will produce the works of James. But they insist that to talk of a change of will, or the willingness to obey or follow the Lord, as part of saving faith itself is to make the fruit part of the root, resulting in serious distortion of the graciousness of salvation. Stating the truth that living faith will produce works is not sufficient to solve this disagreement. Further discussion needs to be done on the nature of faith—that is, the root—which will more clearly show its connection with works—that is, the fruit.

It is not our purpose in this response to enter fully into this discussion except to offer a few comments and questions. As in nature, there is clearly some connection between the root or seed and the plant or fruit that grows from it. If some kind of obedience, represented by the works of James, is necessarily the fruit of saving faith, then it is difficult to see how some dimension of obedience can be totally excluded from the seed of

faith. Surely there is something alike in the essence of a particular fruit and the essence of the seed that produced it.

Another way of looking at the issue is to ask whether the nature of justifying faith is essentially different from the nature of sanctifying faith, assuming that sanctification is really by faith even as is the case of justification. Now it seems clear that some element of a will oriented toward obedience is involved in the very essence of sanctifying faith if, in fact, such faith produces obedience. Unless we are prepared to say that this is a totally new element added to the nature of sanctifying faith that was not present in any aspect in the saving or justifying faith, it would seem that we have to acknowledge some aspect of obedience as inherent in saving faith as well. We would suggest that further exploration of questions of this kind would aid in our discussion of this issue.