



STATEMENT DL155

Understanding the Lordship Salvation Controversy

What must I do to be saved?

The answer to this question is so controversial that it has divided some quarters of evangelical Christianity into warring factions. The issue involved is the nature of salvation and saving faith: What *is* saving faith? What does it mean to receive Jesus as Lord and Savior? How much must one surrender to the Lord at the time of salvation? What are the fruits of repentance?

“Lordship salvation” advocates say that in order to be saved, one must not only believe and acknowledge that Christ is Lord, but also submit to His lordship. In other words, there must be — at the moment one trusts in Christ for salvation — a *willingness* to commit one’s life absolutely to the Lord, even though the actual *practice* of a committed life may not follow immediately or completely. Non-lordship proponents argue that such a pre-salvation commitment to Christ’s lordship compromises salvation by grace.

The present debate is largely due to the publication of John F. MacArthur, Jr.’s *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Zondervan, 1988). According to an article by S. Lewis Johnson in the September 22 issue of *Christianity Today*, this book has produced “an explosion of comment, discussion, and feisty debate.” MacArthur, Senior Pastor of Grace Community Church and president of The Master’s Seminary (both in Sun Valley, California) is a lordship salvation advocate. He wrote his book in response to (among others) a 1981 book by Zane C. Hodges entitled *The Gospel Under Siege* (Redencion Viva). Hodges, former professor of New Testament at Dallas Theological Seminary, espouses the non-lordship view, and argues that much evangelical gospel-preaching is guilty of compromising the grace of the gospel. Hodges followed MacArthur’s book with still another book entitled *Absolutely Free* (Zondervan, 1989).

Another scholar responding to MacArthur’s book is Charles C. Ryrie (of The Ryrie Study Bible fame). Ryrie recently published *So Great Salvation* (Victor, 1989) in which he strongly affirms the non-lordship position. According to Ryrie, the non-lordship position states that accepting Jesus as Lord does not refer to a subjective commitment to Christ’s lordship in one’s life, but rather a repentance (or changing of one’s mind) about one’s ideas of who Christ is (i.e., He is the Sovereign and God) and exercising faith in Christ. Ryrie argues that repentance from sin is what follows in the Christian’s daily walk with the Lord.

Much confusion has overshadowed this controversy because of a lack of precise definitions of key words (although Ryrie does provide some working definitions in his book). Neither side is saying that salvation is by works. Both affirm the clear teaching of Scripture that salvation is a gift freely given by God to man. Nor is either side advocating “easy believism,” a term coined by Lordship proponents to describe the idea that one receives salvation by simply giving intellectual assent to a set of doctrines. The debate will no doubt continue. It is important, however, that in future discussions of this issue, a clarification between the act of justification and process of sanctification be maintained. Justification is the judicial declaration by God that the believer has a righteous standing before Him. This takes place the moment a person receives Jesus as his or her Savior by appropriating Christ’s redemptive work on the cross. Sanctification is the lifelong work of the Holy Spirit which conforms the believer into the image of Christ.

Martin Luther once said that “Faith alone justifies, but not the faith that is alone.” “Works,” Luther said, “are not taken into consideration when the question respects justification. But true faith will no more fail to produce them than the sun can cease to give light.”

Our responsibility as Christians is to present the claims of Christ to a lost and dying world. We may rest secure in the fact that a person’s acceptance of the Gospel will result in the fruit of repentance — but this is the work of the Holy Spirit, not man. — *Bob Lyle*

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