

In 2003, a new book titled, *Hard to Believe*, was published bearing the name of John MacArthur. I must admit that, at the time this book came out, I held MacArthur in fairly high regard as a Bible teacher.

As I read the book, there were several times when a gem of truth would be presented which was refreshing to ponder. “If someone who calls himself a Christian doesn’t think and act like a Christian, he’s not on the road he thinks he is” (p.87); this is a solid truth that bears reflecting upon in this age of Evangelical carelessness. “The only visible evidence you will ever have of your salvation is a life lived in the direction of obedience ...” (p.112); this seems to demonstrate a high regard for obedience to God’s Word. “True greatness is not in our function, but in our relationship to God that places us in His kingdom” (p. 150); wow! – it’s not who we are, but who we are in Christ that makes the difference. Then I found this encouraging thought: “The truth divides people. The more fundamental the truth, the deeper and wider the division” (p.172-3). These are some wonderful nuggets scattered throughout the book that bring a hearty, “Amen!”

However, connecting these gems is a massive amount of disturbing material.

Something I find both discouraging and disturbing is when an author will quote someone in a negative light, and then leave you guessing as to the source of the quotation. This is unfair to the one who is being quoted (for they are not being acknowledged), but it is even more unfair to the reader because a negative impression has been given without knowing who it is. We are specifically told by Paul to “mark them which cause divisions and offences contrary to the doctrine which ye have learned; and avoid them” (Romans 16:17) – yet MacArthur seems strangely unwilling to do so. Quoting someone in a negative light is not “marking” him; to mark him you must name him! Let me speak more plainly. If you hear someone propagating error, you are not protecting anyone from them by simply quoting them and leaving the quotation anonymous! Protection is a responsibility we all bear to our fellow Christians (we are to individually test all who come to us as to whether they are Biblically correct – 1 John 4:1), and providing a safeguard against those who propagate error will only come through naming them. How can I avoid the teaching of someone unless I know who he is? Unless the wolf in sheep’s clothing is identified, how many sheep must he destroy before the alarm is raised? If you and I, as watchmen, fail to call the alarm when we see the enemy approaching, we will be held responsible for the destruction that takes place (Ezekiel 33:6)! In our day of Evangelical inclusivism, it is not popular to identify those who are straying from the narrow way; yet, as MacArthur so eloquently puts it, “you can’t be faithful *and* popular, so take your pick” (p. 33).

Early on in *Hard to Believe*, MacArthur identifies Robert Schuller and the gospel that he propagates as being a replacement of “the biblical gospel” (p.3). Evidently, within MacArthur’s mind, Schuller is safe to identify; his message is far enough away from the truth that there will be little to no backlash for pointing him out. He goes on to clarify that Schuller’s message of “self-esteem” is founded upon alterations to and/or a misinterpretation of Scripture; he rightly identifies the error of the “psychologically man-centered evangelicals” by using Schuller as a classic example (p.3). However, he then goes on to speak of the seeker-sensitive church leaders as those who “have prostituted the divine intention of the gospel. They have replaced the glory of God with the satisfaction

of man” (p. 4). This is a well-structured observation, but, unfortunately, the promoters of this prostituted gospel are not identified. If the reader is sufficiently informed, the names of Bill Hybels and Rick Warren will come to mind. What these well-known men have done is modify the message of the Gospel to make it more acceptable to the world. MacArthur says, “If you modify the message to make Christianity more attractive, then what you have is not Christianity” (p.17). This is an astute observation (in keeping with Galatians 1:7), but the names of two very prominent Evangelicals, who are guilty of this action, are strangely absent. It would seem, to MacArthur, that the wolf who howls like a wolf is worthy of being named so that we can be warned, but two wolves who are guilty of masquerading as sheep can retain their anonymity. The question is this: which is more dangerous to the flock, the wolf that looks like a wolf and sounds like a wolf, or the wolf that tries to look like a sheep and speaks sheep with a hint of a wolfish accent? MacArthur felt free to identify the wolf, but pulled back from identifying the wolves who appear to be sheep, even though the message they are presenting as Christianity is not Christianity, by his own words!

On pages 34 and 35, MacArthur quotes from several individuals to illustrate a “skewed understanding of the doctrine of sovereignty” (p.35), yet nowhere does he identify who made these comments. A quick check online turned up three of the quotes used – all drawn from endorsements of Dave Hunt’s book, *What Love is This?*. Clearly, this is a cheap way to get quotes to say what you want them to, for these are simply book endorsements and don’t represent studied comments made on the doctrine of God’s sovereignty. A more careful use of these quotes would have drawn MacArthur into Hunt’s book itself, or he would have moved on to someone who has taken the time to do a specific study in the area in question. However, even in this less than forthright means of accessing the comments of others, there are misquotations – words changed or omitted without any indication of such! MacArthur quotes Tim LaHaye (whom he identified as “one very famous evangelical”) as saying “... a dreadful doctrine like election” (p.34), yet the proper quote is: “... a dreadful doctrine like Calvinism.”¹ These are very clearly not the same thing! There is far more to Calvinism than election, but, without the change, the quote wouldn’t have fit quite so well; he goes on to leave out significant sections of the original without any indication he has done so. He also quotes Arno Froese as saying, “the flawed theology of pre-selection...” (p.35), when the proper quote is “the flawed philosophical theology of preselection...”² The method of gleaning these quotes was less than honorable, but, beyond that, there are tools to indicate when a word has been changed or omitted from a quotation – no such measures were taken.

Just before this string of negative misquotations, MacArthur quotes from his “friend R. C. Sproul” (p.34). To this point, he has condemned the self-esteem philosophy (p.4), and justifiably so; now, in contradiction, he gives his approval to someone who has endorsed and broadcast the self-esteem philosophy. Sproul has co-authored a book with a number of wayward Evangelicals including Elisabeth Elliott, Gary Ezzo, Joni Tada, and even James Dobson, perhaps the greatest promoter of “Christian” psychology and the self-esteem lie. What a contradiction!

¹ http://www.loyalpublishing.com/products/books/theology/30_5_whatlove_a.cfm

² Ibid.

As I read this book, I kept saying to myself, “This does not sound like John MacArthur” – the concepts being dealt with, yes; but the phrasing and expressions used, no! When I arrived at the end of the book and read the acknowledgements, I realized that MacArthur didn’t write it! The material used in the book came from sermons that he preached, but the book itself was the product of transcribers and editors. The book bears MacArthur’s name, and the content in broad terms may be his, but it’s almost as if he’s meeting a publisher’s demand for more material through the use of editors. A name like John MacArthur probably demands a certain price, so it is expedient for the editors to remain completely anonymous.

As I have read some of MacArthur’s latest writings, I have come away with a sense that he is beginning to pay the price for accommodation. Some of his material appears to be Biblically sound, but mixed in with it is a seed of contradiction. He is becoming another example of a wolf in sheep’s clothing – there is a skeleton of Biblical truth held together by Biblical contradictions and heresy. Paul’s admonition to the Thessalonians was that they withdraw themselves from those who walk in a disorderly manner (2 Thessalonians 3:6). MacArthur has become one of those whose walk is disorderly, and we must avoid his teachings lest we be caught in his web of error.

Perhaps the icing on the cake was his willingness to include a couple of quotes from C. S. Lewis’ book, *Mere Christianity* – not to point out where Lewis was in error, but to use supportive arguments for a point being made. I recognize that Lewis has become highly acclaimed within Evangelical circles, but that does nothing to change the heresy that he believed; it simply underscores the gullibility of modern, professing Christians. Considering some of the doctrines he held, there seems little doubt that Lewis was never truly born-again by the Spirit of God, and his departure to the faith of the Roman Catholics toward the close of his life should be sufficient to exclude him from ever being used as a reference, except to illustrate how easily the mind of man can depart from the Scriptures.

Hard to Believe reads like a typical Evangelical book of today; there are spots of amen-quality truth mixed thoroughly with confusion and contradiction. John MacArthur is no longer a name to be trusted unequivocally. His unwillingness to be obedient to the Biblical doctrine of separation has led him into compromising the truth and accommodating error. In obedience to Romans 16:17, we must “mark” John MacArthur and sound the warning that he espouses teaching which is not in keeping with the pure Word of God.