

Grace to You :: esp Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time

Culturally Contextualized or Historically Connected?

Scripture: 2 Timothy 2:2

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So yesterday we posted an interview between Phil Johnson and John MacArthur. You can download it for free right [here](#). It's a great interview with much that is helpful—I highly recommend it.

But I heard this morning that some folks have been getting kind of fussy about one of John's comments in the interview. The first criticism forwarded to me was from Ed Stetzer, one of the men who endorsed Darrin Patrick's book. His initial tweet said, "JohnMacArthur criticizes @DarrinPatrick's book . . . Read this book endorsed by Keller, Dever, me, etc!"

Apparently, Stetzer wasn't happy—the complaints he made in subsequent tweets echoed the sentiments of other comment threads in the blogosphere. Same old stuff out there—MacArthur is a big meanie, doesn't get it, misrepresented Patrick, unjustly attacks brothers in Christ, etc., etc.

[Tim Challies, who plans to interview John MacArthur in the next week or so, asked for questions from his readers](#). A number of them had heard the cyberspace chatter too, and they wanted Tim to ask John more about Darrin Patrick's book.

Well, let's start with what John said in last Sunday's interview with Phil Johnson:

My theology was framed up as not my own. You know there's a new book on church planting, written by a guy named Darrin Patrick, and he says if you want to be an effective church planter, develop your own theology. You know, when I read that, I almost fell off the chair. What? I mean, can you think of anything worse than to have some guy develop his own theology? This is ultimate niche marketing, you know, develop your own style, your own wardrobe, and then your own theology.

And here's the extended section from Darrin Patrick's book:

One of the common errors of young men who surrender to ministry is to simply adopt the model of a church that they have experienced or idolized. A similar mistake is to blindly adopt the ministry philosophy and practice of a ministry hero. The man who is experiencing head confirmation is thoughtful about his *own* philosophy of ministry, his own ministry style, his own theological beliefs, his own unique gifts, abilities, and desires. In short, there is uniqueness to the way he wants to do ministry. (*Church Planter*, 37)

That paragraph comes from chapter 2, "A Called Man," which is supposed to help potential church planters and pastors discern a call to ministry. Patrick says part of understanding a call involves head confirmation, by which he means thoughtful planning about one's particular ministry—i.e., "How specifically can I serve this church?"

Once again, John MacArthur has cut through the clutter to zero in on a fundamental error represented by that paragraph. Here's the essence of John's concern, not just with that paragraph,

but with the whole book: It's unwise for Darrin Patrick to encourage young church planters to develop their own theological beliefs. It's especially unwise when it's coupled with promoting radical individualism in the ministry.

I once heard Iain Murray speak about young pastors learning to fulfill their own ministry calling. He acknowledged the need for a young man, at the outset of his ministry, to follow the pattern of his hero, mimicking his preaching style. At the same time, Murray warned against merely becoming a clone of another man. A man must study himself, using mature and sanctified judgment to assess himself honestly, to figure out who he is and how God intends to use him. Over time, he'll own his convictions and God will use him to preach the Word effectively to his own generation.

If *that's* what Patrick meant, then his editors, friends, and endorsers could have done him a great service to help him write more clearly. As one commenter said, "Patrick should have communicated more clearly, or the editor should have caught it. We are most certainly responsible for the impact of our words, so we need to use them responsibly." As it stands, Patrick's words are misleading and dangerous to tell young men to be unique about "the way he wants to do ministry," especially when that's connected with his theological beliefs.

Leaders in the church are not to develop their theology; they are to *receive* it from those who have preceded them in life and ministry. Paul told Timothy, "what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also" (2 Timothy 2:2). What Timothy heard from the apostle Paul was not a theology Paul developed for himself. No, Timothy heard divinely-revealed truth from Paul, and the apostolic command was, "Preach the Word" (2 Timothy 4:2). To obey that command, Timothy had to work hard: "do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15).

Here's what church planters *really* need to hear: get yourself out of the way and serve others by giving them the Word of Truth, exactly what you received from faithful men before you.

Pastor, church planter . . . take the "once for all delivered to the saints" faith (Jude 3) from the previous generation of faithful men, and hand that sacred baton to the next generation of faithful men. You'd better determine to know nothing but Jesus Christ and Him crucified (1 Corinthians 2:2). The whole counsel of God should consume you, and you should crucify yourself, *and* your style (Galatians 2:20). People don't need to see how well you've assimilated the culture around you into your ministry and your message; they need to see Jesus and hear Him confront them and their fallen culture (cf. John 12:21).

Pastor, church planter...are you more concerned about contextualizing yourself and your ministry, or about connecting yourself with the saints of old? Are you focused on developing your style and promoting your individual brand, or are you devoting all your energies to understanding what God meant by what He said, and giving the unvarnished truth to others? If it's the latter, you need to stay connected with faithful expositors of God's Word and the historic, apostolic faith.

I understand the modern church planting movement is very popular, is full of energy and zeal, and has the ear (and eye) of the newest generation of Christians. With so much influence, it's not enough that today's church planters just talk about Reformed theology; they also need to understand it

deeply, imbibe it fully, and practice it consistently. Therefore,

1. Don't be so thin-skinned. John MacArthur has always tried to separate himself from the message he preaches. If you criticize what John has said, he doesn't get hurt or offended; he simply points you back to Scripture and asks you to make your case. It's God's authority, not John MacArthur's, that John wants people to recognize when he preaches.

By contrast, many young men in today's church-planting movement have embedded themselves in the message they preach. The authority is centered in what *they* think, not in what the Scripture actually teaches. So it makes sense when they get hurt, offended, and feel attacked when you make a critical comment about their message—their message is an extension of their personality, and they feel the criticism personally.

2. Listen. John has more than fifty years of preaching faithfully, more than forty years in the same pulpit—don't you think you ought to listen? Don't despise the older generation; don't dismiss their wisdom; don't ignore their criticisms of you. Proverbs is full of wisdom like that: "The ear that listens to life-giving reproof will dwell among the wise. Whoever ignores instruction despises himself, but he who listens to reproof gains intelligence" (Proverbs 15:31-32; cf. 10:17; 12:1; 13:18; 15:5).

There's obviously a lot more to say, but we'll have to continue this conversation another time.

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