

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

Ligonier Interview with John MacArthur

Scripture: Ezekiel 2:4–7; Luke 24:45; Romans 6:18; 1 Corinthians 2:16; Ephesians 6:19–20; Colossians 4:4; 2 Timothy 1:6–8; Titus 1:9

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John MacArthur and R.C. Sproul have been friends and ministry partners for several decades. They've taught at the same conferences, shared the same convictions, and, when necessary, fought the same battles against doctrinal error and false teaching.

John was recently interviewed for the website of Dr. Sproul's ministry, Ligonier. John spoke about the early days of Grace to You, his relationship with Dr. Sproul, and some other topics we thought you might find interesting.

Table Talk: How did the *Grace to You* radio program begin, and how many people does it reach today?

John MacArthur: It began in kind of a roundabout fashion. Sometime in the early 1970s, we began to get letters from Baltimore, thanking us for our radio ministry. But we didn't have a radio ministry. So, we looked into it and learned that a Maryland radio station, WRBS, was playing sermon tapes in the evening hours, and people were responding to the teaching of God's Word.

So, we began to discuss what would be needed to sustain a radio ministry. Up to that point, all the nationally syndicated daily Bible-teaching broadcasts featured someone in a studio talking into a microphone. We decided to see what would happen if we just featured sermons from our weekly worship services. We took some one-hour sermons, split them in two, taped short opening and closing segments in the studio, and put them on the air.

We bought time on a local radio station that featured country music, and we were sandwiched between horse races and the evening news. That was not a great time slot for building an audience, so when a nearby Christian station offered us a half hour daily, we seized the opportunity. The response was encouraging immediately, and we have grown from there.

The first official broadcasts of *Grace to You* in its current half-hour format were in 1978. The broadcast premiered on three stations that year. It's now heard daily on more than a thousand stations worldwide. A recent conservative estimate informed us that we have more than two million listeners per week. Add the Internet stream and downloads, and the numbers are staggering.

TT: What do you see as the primary goal and purpose of the Master's College and Seminary?

JM: The goal of both institutions is to produce a generation of young people who have a grasp on the Scriptures, a sound understanding of theology, and a commitment to proclaim and defend the truth of God's Word.

Nothing in the universe is more important than divine truth. We're saved by the truth and sanctified by the truth. We have hope in the truth. We live by the truth. We love the truth. The greatest need in the world is for truth—divine truth, as revealed by the Scriptures.

We want to give students a premium education at the highest level academically, with the highest level of clarity and the highest level of commitment to the truth. Both institutions seek to equip as many graduates as possible with a thoroughly biblical worldview and a deep, abiding love for Christ and His Word.

TT: How would you counsel a pastor who recognizes the inerrancy of Scripture but who struggles to preach with confidence because he knows he does not interpret Scripture infallibly?

JM: Of course, none of us is infallible, but it's possible to understand the truth of the infallible Scriptures without being infallible ourselves. For example, we can know with absolute certainty that Jesus is God, that salvation is by grace through faith, that God is just, and that He judges sin. There's an endless array of things we're taught in Scripture that are clear and undeniable. The central message of Scripture is *perspicuous*—clear enough for all its essential propositions to be understood. Above all, the way of salvation through Christ is clear, and the claim that we are fallible will be no excuse for those who reject it.

It is significant that Scripture commends boldness, clarity, conviction, and courage—especially in church leaders (Titus 1:9). Timidity and faintheartedness are not spiritual virtues to be nurtured but fleshly character flaws that need to be overcome (Ephesians 6:19–20; Colossians 4:4; 2 Timothy 1:6–8). The faithful preacher's calling is to declare the Word of God without mitigating it, modifying it, or apologizing for it. He is not there to share personal opinions. He ought to speak accordingly (Ezekiel 2:4–7).

The commonly held notion that strong convictions are inherently uncharitable is itself an uncharitable judgment, rooted in secular and postmodern rationalism rather than biblical values. Likewise, skepticism, not Scripture, is the source of the notion that we can never really be sure about anything because our interpretations are fallible.

It's not "arrogant" by any biblical standard to declare our confidence in the truth of God's Word or to say "Thus says the Lord" where God has indeed spoken. What's truly arrogant is the notion that God hasn't spoken clearly enough, or that He hasn't told us enough to enable the faithful pastor to teach and preach with that kind of authority.

It's true enough that the mind of God is inscrutable, especially from the narrow perspective of human wisdom. Notice, however, that when the Apostle Paul made that very point, he immediately added, "But we have the mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:16). The immediate context, especially verse 10, shows that Paul was speaking of how the Spirit illumines our minds to understand what is revealed to us in Scripture. Luke 24:45 says Christ opened the disciples' minds "to understand the Scriptures." Though we cannot know everything perfectly, of course, it does not follow that we cannot know *anything* for certain. Confusion on that point is the Achilles' heel of postmodern philosophy.

TT: Why did you write the book *Slave*?

JM: I wrote the book because I have always been concerned that professing Christians don't really understand what it means to confess Jesus as Lord. I've been on a multi-decade campaign to help people understand that. I have written about it in a number of books because practically every issue that currently troubles evangelical churches comes back to a failure to grasp all that is involved in Jesus' lordship. Whose church is it? Who is in charge? Who sets standards of truth, righteousness, obedience, and the gospel message? Are those things determined by opinion polls and democratic elections, or does the lordship of Christ and the sovereign rule of God mean something?

The answers to all those questions are easy once we recognize the true implications of the biblical word *doulos*—"slave." To say that Jesus is Lord and we are His slaves is to define the relationship with inescapable clarity.

We're not like butlers or table waiters—as if we were free agents employed by someone to serve—but we are *slaves*, owned by Christ and obligated to render absolute obedience to Him. He purchased us with His blood. He redeemed us from the bondage of our sin. But "having been set free from sin, [we] have become slaves of righteousness" (Romans 6:18). Once we understand that, a host of difficult practical and theological questions are easily answered.

So, in an important sense, that book sums up and punctuates practically everything I have been saying about Jesus' lordship for the past forty years.

TT: You have ministered alongside Dr. Sproul at conferences for many years in spite of differences on issues such as baptism and eschatology. How would you respond to Christians who believe that disagreement on these doctrines precludes any such cooperation?

JM: Obviously, the things we agree on are far greater in number and infinitely more important than the things we might disagree on. When it comes to foundational matters and the core truths of the gospel, R. C. and I are in complete agreement. The drive-train of authentic Christianity consists of vital doctrines such as the nature of God; the fallenness of humanity; the person and work of Christ; the authority and inspiration of Scripture; the way of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone; the nature of Christ's atoning work; and all truths of similar import. On all such matters, R. C. and I stand together without wavering or hesitation.

That's not to say other doctrines on which we may disagree are basically unimportant. But as long as we agree on things that are essential to the gospel, two believers ought to be able to disagree without anathematizing one another when it comes to secondary issues like the mode or subjects of baptism, the timing of events associated with Christ's return, or the finer nuances of biblical ecclesiology. Baptism, of course, is an extremely important issue, but it isn't the kind of thing that separates the sheep from the goats. It deals with a symbol, not the actual instrument of justification.

When anyone understands and affirms all the essentials of gospel truth, we can stand together and affirm the honor and glory of God in His redemptive work. We can participate together and affirm one another in the proclamation and defense of the gospel, and it is a joy and a privilege to do so alongside Dr. Sproul.

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