

John MacArthur



Servant of the Word and Flock

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John MacArthur

Servant of the Word and Flock



IAIN H. MURRAY



THE BANNER OF TRUTH TRUST

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To
The Elders, Staff, and Members of
Grace Community Church
with thankfulness for the grace given to them
to serve Christians across the world.

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Foreword

*F*riendship with John MacArthur over the last dozen years has been one of the happiest surprises of my life. Surprise because we live on opposite sides of the world, and because, coming from somewhat different evangelical traditions, we might not seem to be natural fellow-labourers. It was shared convictions on great truths that brought us together, as they are bringing others committed to Scripture together across the world.

Writing a biography of Dr MacArthur never occurred to me until an event in 2009. Prior to that date the elders of his church asked me to preach on the fortieth anniversary of his ministry at Grace Community Church at Sun Valley, Los Angeles, which was being marked on Sunday, February 1, 2009. I sensed that some comment by me on the ministry we were commemorating would be appropriate, but how to address that subject was not at first clear to me. Believing as we do that the pulpit on the Lord's Day is for preaching His Word, that possibility was excluded. I therefore settled for writing a biographical sketch as a short tribute.

Unknown to me, Phil Johnson and Mike Taylor (editors working for Grace to You and members of Grace Community Church) had a volume in preparation to mark the anniversary,

Truth Endures: Landmark Sermons by John MacArthur. This book was at the printers when my sketch arrived towards the end of 2008. Johnson and Taylor wrote, ‘It came unexpectedly after corrected proofs had already been sent to the printer.’ They ‘stopped the presses’ and included my sixty pages of ‘biographical sketch’. While I appreciated this kindness and honour, I was conscious that I had left too much unsaid, and that led to the book now in the reader’s hands. It includes most of that original piece with a good deal more. My hope is to pass on to others the encouragement that I have found myself in the record of John MacArthur’s life and ministry.

This is still little more than a ‘sketch’: a full portrait must await a later date and come from another hand. It is not the time for a full biography while a person’s life is still in progress. John’s ambition is to minister the Word of God to the end of his life; in his phrase, ‘to die with his boots on’. His father was spared to serve until he passed ninety years of age; whether our friend lives to that age or not, he believes it is a duty to keep ‘growing’ as long as life lasts: ‘People sometimes point out to me that what I’ve said on one tape doesn’t agree with what I said on a later tape. My response to them is that I am growing. I did not know everything then, and I do not know everything now.’ So, as he said on another occasion, ‘You’ll never be able to evaluate the ministry of John MacArthur until all the evidence is in.’

While I have not written these pages in conjunction with John, the aid of a number of people in his congregation has been indispensable. Especial thanks are due to Rick Holland, Phil Johnson, and Don Green. Mr Johnson’s knowledge of unpublished source material is unique; I could not have written without it, and it is my hope that he will himself one day

write on the ministry in which he has so largely shared. Staff members, Pat Rotisky and Catherine Curry, have been a great help to me, and numbers of others at Grace Community Church have encouraged us in various ways. The days which my wife and I have spent at the church, and at Grace to You, will ever be treasured memories. In a congregation where the blessing of God is known there will ever be affection between the people, and others find a ready welcome. So it has been for us at Sun Valley.

I am indebted to John MacArthur for the liberty to quote him as extensively as I do; and to Mrs Patricia MacArthur for her valued measure of input and for allowing the use of family photographs. Banner staff have given their customary best support in the production of this title, and my friends, Ian S. Barter and John R. de Witt, gave helpful comment on my draft. Jean, as ever, has kept everything running happily in our home, while I only looked after the computer.

IAIN H. MURRAY
Edinburgh,
August 2010

Introduction

WHAT IS AN EVANGELICAL LEADER?

Perized by John MacArthur is an old edition of John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments of these latter and perilous days* (1563), the book which first printed the story of William Tyndale, translator of the English Bible and martyred in 1536. Tyndale's enemy, Thomas More, complained of him that he was 'both nowhere and everywhere': 'nowhere' because few knew his actual location; 'everywhere' because his testimony was reaching all parts of the English-speaking nations. John MacArthur would never think of it, but the words suggest something of a parallel to me. Through hundreds of radio stations his voice is heard over a thousand times daily around the world; his books are to be found in thirty-five languages; yet the local scene where he spends the great part of his life is little known by most who read him or hear him broadcast. He is also 'nowhere and everywhere'.

The element of personal obscurity is of no concern to MacArthur. He stands in that genuine evangelical tradition

which has no time for the creation of religious celebrities. When Paul says, ‘Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God’, MacArthur understands him to be saying; ‘Don’t make anything out of me. I’m just a servant of Christ. I’m an under-rower, a third-level galley slave; I pull my oar, and that’s what I’m supposed to do, nothing worthy of special attention.’¹

Tyndale was ‘a gospeller’, or, as we would say, an evangelical. I use the term in its traditional meaning. In brief, an evangelical is a person who believes the ‘three Rs’: Ruin by the Fall, Redemption through Jesus Christ, and Regeneration by the Holy Spirit. It follows that an ‘evangelical leader’ is a person who stands out in the advancement and defence of those truths. The title does not necessarily imply success judged by numbers and immediate results. On that basis neither Paul nor Tyndale might qualify.

1. An evangelical leader is one who leads and guides the lives of others by the Scripture as the Word of God. He seeks to repudiate every other form of influence and pressure. His great concern is to teach Scripture accurately, and to see lives submitted to its authority.

2. An evangelical leader inspires the affection of followers because they learn Christ through him, and see something of Christ in him. They follow him because he follows Christ. And they love him because he loves them in Christ’s name. ‘The apostle Paul summarized the spirit of the true leader when he

¹ *Hard to Believe* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003), p. 46. An ‘under-rower’ is a favourite simile with MacArthur and he explains it further in *The Master’s Plan* (Chicago: Moody, 1991), p. 39: ‘There are several words in the Greek for servant, and Paul used the one that best conveyed the idea of a lowly servant (GK., *huperetes*, “an under-rower”).’ It was the name for the slaves on the lowest deck of a three-tiered ship propelled by oars.

wrote, “Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ.”² And what is to be imitated the Scriptures do not leave in doubt: ‘Almost every time Scripture holds up Christ as our example to follow, the stress is on his humility.’³

3. An evangelical leader is a man prepared to be unpopular. From the days when Ahab said to Elijah, ‘Are you he that troubles Israel?’, faithfulness to Scripture will not bring the approval of the majority. Dr MacArthur says bluntly, ‘You cannot be faithful and popular, so take your pick.’ A quest for popularity is a very short-term thing. For an evangelical, ‘success isn’t measured in hours, or even centuries. Our focus is fixed on eternity.’ Success ‘is not prosperity, power, prominence, popularity, or any of the other worldly notions of success. Real success is doing the will of God regardless of the consequences.’⁴

4. An evangelical leader is one who is awake to the dangers of the times. Not every Christian has the distinction that was once given to the tribe of Issachar, ‘The men of Issachar had understanding of the times, to know what Israel ought to do’ (*1 Chron.* 12:32). There are periods in church history when the leaders have seriously mistaken the way in which the cause of Christ is to be carried forward. The signs of the times have been misread. A true evangelical leader is raised up to provide God-given direction.

5. An evangelical leader will not direct attention to himself. He personally owes everything to Jesus Christ. As a sinner he sees the need to live in a spirit of repentance all his days. He knows the contrast between what he is in himself and the mes-

² *Twelve Ordinary Men* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2002), p. 44, in a chapter where MacArthur sets out what leadership means.

³ *The Jesus You Can’t Ignore* (Nashville: Nelson, 2008), p. 205.

⁴ *Ashamed of the Gospel* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1993), p. 29.

sage that he preaches: ‘We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us’ (2 *Cor.* 4:7). ‘God chooses whom He chooses in order that He might receive the glory. He chooses weak instruments so that no one will attribute the power to human instruments rather than to God, who wields those instruments.’⁵

It follows that genuine spiritual leadership will lead others to the conclusion: ‘Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but to Your name give glory, because of Your mercy, because of Your truth’ (*Psa.* 115:1).

⁵ *Twelve Ordinary Men*, p. 13.

Youth in California

*J*ohn Fullerton MacArthur Jr. was born in Los Angeles, California, on June 19, 1939. Rather inaccurately 'Junior' was often to remain appended to his name, for the truth is that many a 'John MacArthur' had gone before him. One of the MacArthur family by that name had emigrated from Glasgow, Scotland, to Canada in 1815. This immigrant's son and grandson were also 'John', and it was not until a fourth-generation member of the family line was born about 1885, and named Harry, that the Christian name changed.

Harry MacArthur, the grandfather of our subject, was working as a chief telegrapher on the Canadian Railways at Calgary, Alberta, when he became a Christian. His wife, Olivia Mary Fullerton, was the daughter of a Thomas Fullerton, who was minister of the Presbyterian Church of Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, on the east coast of Canada.¹ Fullerton had come from Scotland where his father had also been a Presbyterian minister. There was thus Scottish ancestry on both sides of the marriage of Harry and Olivia.

¹ Thomas Fullerton was minister of St James Presbyterian Kirk in Charlottetown, 1893-1921, a ministry interrupted while he served in the Canadian army during the Boer War.

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