

~ Promotional Flier ~

The MacArthur Study Bible

*The Work of a Lifetime,
For Our Time*

What Does It Take to Create a Classic?

For thirty years, thirty hours a week, John MacArthur has poured over every page of God's Word. Explored every verse. Dug into every difficult passage. And as he studied, he combined the exegetical skills of a world-class scholar with the wisdom and warmth of an experienced pastor.

The MacArthur Study Bible is crafted in a variety of bindings, including genuine leather, and offers thoughtful touches like gilded edges and a satin ribbon marker. But it's not what you hold in your hand that matters—it's what you hide in your heart.

Unlike past "classics" burdened by outdated theological systems, *The MacArthur Study Bible* strives to let the systems go, and let the Word of God speak. And day after day, year after year, you can always count on hearing something new.

After all, that is precisely what you should expect from the work of a lifetime—a lifetime of discovery in God's Word.

John MacArthur is pastor/teacher of Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, California, and is the author of numerous best-selling books, including *Rediscovering Expository Preaching* and *The Love of God*. His popular expository style of teaching can be heard daily on "Grace to You," a 30-minute internationally syndicated radio broadcast. John and his wife Patricia have four grown children and reside in Southern California.



~ Promotion at a Website ~

Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time

God's Word is ready to be unleashed. It's ready to transform the way you think and change the way you live. It's ready to be your anchor. Your teacher. Your counselor. Your comforter. Your compass.

But the Bible can work only when you understand what it means by what it says. Casual reading, guesswork, and good intentions never render the riches or results of careful study. It's only when you dig deep into God's Word that its truths are unleashed in your life.

The MacArthur Study Bible will help you unleash God's truth, one verse at a time.

The MacArthur Study Bible and Bible Commentary

A Critique

INTRODUCTION

The MacArthur Study Bible was released in October 1997, published by Word Bibles. The version used was *The New King James Version*, though later editions come with the NASB text. It contains over 20,000 study notes. The notes are voluminous and extensive. The *Study Bible* was revised and updated in 2006.

The MacArthur Bible Commentary was published in 2005 by Nelson. The *Study Bible* and the *Commentary* are essentially one and the same. The study notes are basically identical in both volumes. The only difference is the format. The former is in a study Bible format with the Bible text and cross references above and the study notes on the bottom of each page. The latter is in a commentary format with no Bible text. In the *Commentary* the study notes are more readable, being in a larger font. The notes in the study Bible are in very small print. If you compare the notes of the *Study Bible* to the notes of the *Commentary*, you will find them to be the same.

Over the course of more than 28 years, MacArthur has preached primarily from the New Testament, and these messages form the basis of the New Testament study notes. The Old Testament notes were done by the faculty of The Master's Seminary. MacArthur personally checked and reviewed, worked and re-worked all of the study notes and he claims full responsibility for them: "I personally bear full responsibility for all the notes in *The MacArthur Study Bible* because they all have come from me and

through me.”¹

In his promotional advertisements (see beginning of this critique), MacArthur compares his study Bible with previous ones: “*Unlike past ‘classics’ burdened by outdated theological systems, The MacArthur Study Bible strives to let the systems go, and let the Word of God speak.*” This is quite a claim to make. He is claiming that his study Bible is true to the Word of God whereas other “classic” study Bibles are burdened by outdated (and erroneous!) theological systems. The “classic” study Bible of all time is the *Scofield Reference Bible* and the “theological system” which it represents is dispensationalism. It is most probably the *Scofield Study Bible* which MacArthur refers to, as well as to other dispensational study Bibles which have followed in its train (such as *The Ryrie Study Bible*). Is dispensationalism really “outdated” and erroneous?

MacArthur, though trained in a seminary which was originally dispensational, has steadily departed from dispensationalism in many areas and has enthusiastically embraced many aspects of Reformed Theology. Reformed theologian, John Gerstner, in a lecture series given at Geneva College (9/27/86-10/3/86), had this to say about MacArthur’s departure from dispensationalism:

It looks as if John MacArthur is getting out of the vine [in the context he is talking about getting out of the dispensational camp]...John MacArthur has a very special place in my heart...he’s a man of real ability, and he’s one of the dispensationalists (who) in my opinion is realizing the burden of this doctrine, and I think he’s trying to get out of it...I’m only mentioning this because this is essential to the dispensational way of thinking and John MacArthur as far as I know is getting as far out of that as any person who can still be called a dispensationalist is out of it, but not all the way yet.

In Dr. Gerstner’s estimation, John MacArthur has gone as far away from dispensationalism as anyone can go who is still called a

¹ Personal Notes (Introductory Section), page xi.

dispensationalist. He is not all the way out of dispensationalism yet, but close to it.

For many years we have been concerned about Dr. MacArthur’s teachings as found in his published writings and public tapes. As former members of the IFCA, we were especially concerned because some of Dr. MacArthur’s teachings contradicted the clearly worded IFCA Doctrinal Statement which made us wonder how Dr. MacArthur could, with integrity, annually sign the doctrinal statement and how the IFCA leadership could allow him to maintain his membership in the IFCA. If a man does not believe the doctrinal statement and teaches contrary to it, then he should not be a member of the organization.

With the publication of *The MacArthur Study Bible* and *The MacArthur Bible Commentary* we are not surprised to find some of these same erroneous teachings. It is the purpose of this paper to point out places in the study notes where these questionable teachings are set forth. This paper deals with such issues as: (1) the Eternal Sonship of Christ, (2) the Extent of the Atonement, (3) the Two Natures of the Believer, (4) Lordship Salvation, (5) Saving Faith, (6) Dispensationalism, and (7) the Gift of Prophecy. We will not attempt a detailed analysis because this has already been done elsewhere.² Our main purpose is to point out some areas of doctrinal concern and refer the reader to other available literature where these issues are dealt with in more detail. This might prove helpful for those who are interested in further study and investigation.

We will consider MacArthur’s teachings under various categories. We will quote MacArthur’s study note and then we will give in brackets the place where that study note can be found. For example, [1 John 2:2] indicates that the quote is to be found in *MacArthur’s Study Bible* under 1 John 2:2. The same note will be found whether you search the *Study Bible* or the *Commentary*.

At the outset we want to acknowledge that most of MacArthur’s

² We have documented and analyzed John MacArthur’s teachings in an extensive paper entitled, *The Teachings of John MacArthur, Jr.* (\$6.00, over 120 pages).

study notes are helpful, on target and true to the Word of God, and for this we are thankful. But as we will point out, there are significant problems with some of the notes and these doctrinal problems are of concern, especially since MacArthur's writings are so widely circulated. May God give us discernment in these days to "prove all things, hold fast that which is good" (1 Thess. 5:21).

(1) MACARTHUR'S DENIAL OF THE ETERNAL SONSHIP OF CHRIST

MacArthur, for a period of at least 25 years, taught that Christ did not become the Son of God until He was born in Bethlehem, at the time of the incarnation.³ This "incarnational Sonship" view is in sharp contrast to the "eternal Sonship" position which says that Christ has always been the Son of God and that His Sonship is essential to His true identity and cannot be divorced from the Person He is.

In his published and public writings MacArthur strongly denied the eternal Sonship of Christ as the following quotes indicate:

"The Bible nowhere speaks of the eternal Sonship of Christ...He was always God, but He became Son. Eternally He is God, but only from His incarnation has He been Son...Christ was not Son until His incarnation" (*Hebrews*, 1983, pp. 27-28).

"Don't let anyone tell you that Christ is the eternal Son...Christ's Sonship began at a point in time, not in eternity...Christ was not a Son until He came into this world through the virgin birth" (*The Superiority of Christ—Hebrews 1-2*, 1986, pp. 52-54).

³ MacArthur's incarnational Sonship view was first set forth publicly in a taped message given in 1972 (Tape GC-1602) dealing with Hebrews 1:4-6. On this tape he said, "Don't you let anyone tell you that He is the eternal Son...His Sonship began in a point of time, not in eternity."

"Nowhere in Scripture does it say that Jesus has eternally been the Son...He assumed the role of a Son in His incarnation" (*Acting on the Good News—Romans 1*, 1987, pp. 35-41).

MacArthur's strong denial of Christ's eternal Sonship can also be found in his major commentaries on *Galatians* and *Romans*.

In light of this strong denial of eternal Sonship, how could MacArthur sign the IFCA doctrinal statement which says, "We believe in one Triune God, **eternally existing in three persons—Father, Son and Holy Spirit**.... We believe that the Lord Jesus Christ, **the eternal Son of God**, became man"?⁴

MacArthur's denial of eternal Sonship, which is forcefully stated in his earlier writings, is more cautiously stated in his *Study Bible*. Note the following:

"God's Son was born in a point of time. He was always God, but He fulfilled His role as Son in space and time at His incarnation" [Hebrews 1:5].

"God's Son was born in a point of time. He was always God, but He demonstrated His role as Son in space and time at His incarnation" [Hebrews 1:5, revised edition].

MacArthur held the belief that Christ was always God, but that He was not always the Son of God. He became the Son when He was born in Bethlehem. His Sonship, according to MacArthur, was merely a "role" that He assumed in time.

"It (Psalm 2:7) is the only OT reference to the Father/Son relationship in the Trinity, a relationship planned in eternity past and realized in the incarnation" [Psalm 2:7].

Christ's Sonship was planned in eternity past but was not actually realized until the incarnation. Prior to the incarnation, according to

⁴ MacArthur's Incarnational Sonship view has been answered in the book, *The Eternal Sonship of Christ* (Loizeaux Brothers), by George Zeller and Renald Showers (available from us for \$5.75 plus postage). The book explains why the doctrine of the Eternal Sonship of Christ is so important and why its denial is serious error.

MacArthur, He was not the Son of God. In the revised edition this was modified slightly:

“It is also the only OT reference to the Father/Son relationship in the Trinity, a relationship decreed in eternity past and demonstrated in the incarnation” [Psalm 2:7, Revised Edition].

Here is his comment under Romans 1:4:

“While He was eternally the Son in anticipation of His incarnation, it was when He entered the world in incarnation that He was declared to all the world as the Son of God and took on the role of submission to the Father” [Rom. 1:4].

MacArthur implies here that Christ did not actually become the Son until the incarnation. Prior to Bethlehem He was only the Son “in anticipation.” He also teaches that Sonship is merely a “role” which Christ assumed and that it involves “submission” to the Father [the Bible teaches that Sonship involves not servitude, but equality with God (see John 5:18), and notice also how Sonship is contrasted with the idea of servitude in Galatians 4:7, Hebrews 3:5-6, Matthew 21:33-39].

“We teach that, in the incarnation, the second person of the Trinity laid aside His right to the full prerogatives of coexistence with God, assumed the place of a Son, and took on an existence appropriate to a servant while never divesting Himself of His divine attributes” [this quote is taken from the section called “Overview of Theology” in *The MacArthur Study Bible* and the section called “Key Teachings of the Bible” in *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*].

This last quotation finds its origin in the doctrinal statement of The Master’s College and Seminary. The most troubling part of this paragraph is the following phrase, “In the incarnation the second person of the Trinity...**assumed the place of a Son.**” This statement implies that prior to the incarnation Christ had not assumed the place of a Son. Also it implies that Christ did not assume the role of a Son until the incarnation. However, the Bible teaches that Sonship is not a role that Christ played, nor is it a place that He assumed. Sonship relates to Christ’s essential identity. He has always existed as the

Son; He has forever been in the bosom of the Father (John 1:18). Sonship is not something that He ever assumed.

After the *MacArthur Study Bible* was first published, John MacArthur seemed to reverse his view on Christ’s Sonship. He seemed to repudiate the “incarnational Sonship” view which he taught for over 25 years. In a document entitled, *Reexamining the Eternal Sonship of Christ* (September 1999), MacArthur said the following:

“I want to state publicly that I have abandoned the doctrine of ‘incarnational Sonship.’ Careful study and reflection have brought me to understand that Scripture does indeed present the relationship between God the Father and Christ the Son as an eternal Father/Son relationship. I no longer regard Christ’s Sonship as a role He assumed at His incarnation.”⁵

I am thankful for Dr. MacArthur’s clear affirmation of Christ’s eternal Sonship as stated in the above mentioned document and in the quotation just cited. I sincerely thank God for his willingness to humbly admit and acknowledge that his earlier teaching on Christ’s Sonship was erroneous and not in line with Scripture.

In spite of MacArthur’s apparent reversal on this issue, I still have some lingering concerns.

MacArthur said, “I no longer regard Christ’s Sonship as a role He assumed at His incarnation.” If this is true, then why hasn’t he changed his school’s doctrinal statement? Why does it still say that in the incarnation He “assumed the place of a Son”? Why does MacArthur still publish this doctrinal statement in both his *Study Bible* and his *Commentary* without changing this phrase which strongly implies that Christ did not assume the place of a Son until His incarnation (thus denying His eternal Sonship)? And if

⁵ This statement was sent to me on 9/1/99 via e-mail from the office of Phillip Johnson who serves on MacArthur’s staff. A full copy of MacArthur’s statement and our response to it is available from the Middletown Bible Church.

MacArthur no longer regards Christ's Sonship as a role He assumed at His incarnation, then why does he still speak of Sonship as a "role" in his note under Hebrews 1:5? Also his note under Romans 1:4 is confusing. Was Christ actually the Son of God prior to the incarnation, or was He only the Son in an anticipatory sense? The note seems to imply the latter.

It has now been over a decade since MacArthur supposedly repudiated His incarnational Sonship view. I have not yet found, in any of MacArthur's published writings since 1999, any clear, unequivocal statement defending Christ's eternal Sonship. There may be such a statement, but I have not found it. At the very least MacArthur could have changed His doctrinal statement in favor of a clear statement affirming Christ's eternal Sonship. To my knowledge He has not done this.

MacArthur's former denial of the eternal Sonship of Christ triggered a great amount of controversy in the IFCA which lasted for years and which resulted in scores of men (including this author) and a number of churches leaving the IFCA. These men who left were merely defending the doctrine of the eternal Sonship of Christ, based on the IFCA doctrinal statement. In 1989 MacArthur appeared at the IFCA National Convention in Limerick defending the incarnational Sonship view, and in 1991 he wrote a booklet "The Sonship of Christ" defending this same erroneous doctrine. This booklet was sent to all IFCA members.

The damage all of this did to our fellowship of Churches was inestimable. We are *not* blaming John MacArthur for what happened. The burden of responsibility rested on the IFCA leadership. But the fact remains that it was his teaching that triggered the controversy. In MacArthur's 1999 statement, we wish that there could have been some indication of remorse or regret over the damage that took place in the IFCA. I know that I personally would be deeply grieved if something I taught had triggered a tremendous controversy in a fellowship of churches resulting in great damage and division. Especially so if I later concluded that my teaching had been in error. "Be not many teachers knowing that we shall receive the greater judgment" (James 3:1).

I could only wish that MacArthur would speak to the issue of

Christ's Sonship as clearly as does the IFCA doctrinal statement: "We believe in one Triune God, **eternally existing in three persons—Father, Son and Holy Spirit....** We believe that the Lord Jesus Christ, **the eternal Son of God**, became man" (Sections 2 and 3a). There is no need here for an uncertain trumpet.

(2) MACARTHUR'S DENIAL THAT CHRIST DIED AS A SUBSTITUTE FOR ALL MEN

MacArthur denies the truth that Christ died as a Substitute for **all men**. He makes this clear in his public tapes:

"He is the Substitute only for those who believe....In the substitutionary sense He bore only the sins of those who ultimately would put their faith in Him" (Tape GC 47-36, on 2 Cor. 5:14).

"If sinners are sent to hell to pay forever for their sins, their sins could not have been paid for by Christ on the cross" (Tape GC 47-38, on 2 Cor. 5:18-21).

"Not one for whom He died can possibly miss heaven" (Tape GC 80-123, a quote from A.W. Pink, quoted favorably by MacArthur). This means that MacArthur agrees with Pink that Christ did not die for those who miss heaven.

MacArthur believes that the non-elect benefit from the death of Christ, but only in a temporal way (they are not destroyed instantly, they benefit from the rain and sun, they benefit from "common grace," etc.). But he does not believe that Christ paid sin's penalty for the non-elect:

"The focus and attention of the actual atonement of Christ, the actual expiation, the actual sin-bearing was in behalf of those who would believe....The actual payment, however, was limited to those who believed, whose names were written in the Lamb's book of life before the foundation of the world" (Tape GC 47-38).

How then can John MacArthur truthfully and sincerely sign the IFCA doctrinal statement which teaches the exact opposite: "We

believe that the Lord Jesus Christ died on the cross *for all mankind* as a representative, vicarious, substitutionary sacrifice” (emphasis added)?

MacArthur, in his study Bible, is consistent in his teaching that Christ paid sin’s penalty only for those who will believe (the elect):

“Christ actually paid the penalty only for those who would repent and believe...Most of the world will be eternally condemned to hell to pay for their own sins, so they could not have been paid for by Christ...His sacrifice was sufficient to pay the penalty for all the sins of all whom God brings to faith...the actual satisfaction and atonement was made only for those who believe” [1 John 2:2].

“God the Father...had Him (Jesus) die as a Substitute to pay the penalty for the sins of those who believe in Him...On the cross He was treated as if He were guilty of all the sins ever committed by all who would ever believe” [2 Cor. 5:21].

In his note on Galatians 3:13, MacArthur teaches that Christ bore “God’s wrath for believers’ sins on the cross.”

“Christ suffered...as the Christian’s substitute. To bear sins was to be punished for them. Christ bore the punishment and the penalty for believers...This great doctrine of the substitutionary atonement is the heart of the gospel. Actual atonement, sufficient for the sins of the whole world, was made for all who would ever believe, namely the elect” [1 Peter 2:24].

“Not all will be ransomed, but only the many who believe by the work of the Holy Spirit and for whom the actual atonement was made. Christ became the object of God’s just wrath in the believer’s place—He died his death and bore his sin....the substitutionary aspect of His death is applied to the elect alone” [1 Timothy 2:6].

“**Taste death for everyone.** Everyone who believes, that is. The death of Christ can only be applied in its efficacy to those who come to God repentantly in faith, asking for saving grace and forgiveness of sins” [Hebrews 2:9].

“God treated Him (Christ) as if He had committed every sin ever committed by every person who would ever believe”

[Isaiah 53:6].

In his note on 1 Timothy 4:10, MacArthur explains how Christ’s death benefits the “non-elect” only in a temporal sense, but that Christ died as a Substitute only for believers.

MacArthur’s teaching that Christ did not pay sin’s penalty for all men has been fully documented and analyzed.⁶ Also see Appendix C, “A Critique of the MacArthur Study Bible” found in *The Death Christ Died* by Robert Lightner (pages 161-165), published by Kregel (Revised Edition, 1998).

(3) MACARTHUR’S DENIAL OF THE TWO NATURES OF THE BELIEVER

MacArthur teaches that the believer has but one nature, the new nature in Christ. This is a position held by some Reformed men. What is problematic is how MacArthur in good conscience can sign the IFCA doctrinal statement which in its section on *The Two Natures of the Believer* says, “We believe that every saved person possesses two natures, with provision made for victory of the new nature over the old nature through the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit.” This is flatly contradicted by MacArthur’s published writings where he says:

“I believe it is a serious misunderstanding to think of the believer as having both an old and new nature. Believers do not have dual personalities...there is no such thing as an old nature in the believer” (*Freedom From Sin—Romans 6-7*, Moody Press, pp. 31-32).

“The new nature is not added to the old nature but replaces it. The transformed person is a completely new ‘I.’ Biblical terminology, then, does not say that a Christian has two different natures. He has but one nature, the new nature in

⁶ *The Teachings of John MacArthur* (\$6.00, over 120 pages). See also our paper, *For Whom Did Christ Die?—A Defense of Unlimited Atonement* (22 pages, 50¢).

Christ. The old self dies and the new self lives.” (*The MacArthur NT Commentary— Ephesians*, p.164).

“I oppose the two-nature dualism that was popularized by *The Scofield Reference Bible*...Scofield believed all Christians have two active natures—the old or Adamic nature, and the divine nature received through the new birth...According to this view, every Christian still has the old sinful nature to contend with—but now has a new, godly nature as well. It is a kind of spiritual schizophrenia” (*The Vanishing Conscience*, p.217).

MacArthur teaches the same thing in his study notes as we shall now see:

“The believer does not have two competing natures, the old and the new; but one new nature that is still incarcerated in unredeemed flesh” [Romans 6:6].

“The renewal of the mind in salvation brings not simply a renovation of character, but transformation of the old to the new self. In Christ, the old self no longer exists” [Ephesians 4:24].

“The new, regenerate self, which replaces the old man; this is the essence of what believers are in Christ” [Colossians 3:10].

“Our old self died with Christ...we have been removed from the unregenerate self’s presence and control” [Romans 6:6].

WHY THEN DO BELIEVERS SIN?

Sin must have a source. If the believer does not have an old nature, but only the new nature in Christ, then why does the believer sin? What is sin’s source? Where does sin come from? If the old self no longer exists, then why do we sin at all?

“The reason believers still sin is their unredeemed flesh” [Colossians 3:10].

“There is still sin in the believer’s unredeemed human flesh” [Ephesians 4:24].

“Although the old self is dead, sin retains a foothold in our temporal flesh or our unredeemed humanness” [Romans 6:6].

“The physical body [is] the headquarters from which sin operates in the believer” [Romans 6:13].

“[The moral body is] the only remaining repository where sin finds the believer vulnerable. The brain and its thinking processes are part of the body and thus tempt our souls with its sinful lusts” [Romans 6:12].

“Scripture uses the term FLESH in a morally evil sense to describe man’s unredeemed humanness, i.e., that remnant of the old man which will remain with each believer until each receives his or her glorified body” [Romans 7:5].

“Sin no longer controls the whole man (as with an unbeliever) but it does hold captive the believer’s members, or his fleshly body” [Romans 7:14].

“His sin does not flow out of his new redeemed innermost self, but from his unredeemed humanness, his flesh” [Romans 7:17].

“The flesh serves as a base camp from which sin operates in the Christian’s life. Because of its fallenness, it is still subject to sin and is thoroughly contaminated” [Romans 7:18].

“Body of death=the believer’s unredeemed humanness, which has its base of operation in the body” [Romans 7:24].

“THE FLESH=Our unredeemed humanness—that complex of sinful passions that sin generates through its one remaining domain, our bodies” [Romans 8:12].

“THE FLESH. This is not simply the human body, but **includes the mind, will and emotions** which are all subject to sin. It refers in general to our unredeemed humanness” [Romans 5:16].

If the old man has died, as MacArthur teaches, then we are dealing with a very lively corpse! According to this last quote, the flesh includes a mind that is subject to sin, a will that is subject to sin and emotions that are subject to sin! How then can MacArthur teach that “the believer does not have two competing natures” [Romans 6:6]? If the mind, will and emotions are contaminated by sin, then is not this in competition with the mind, will and emotions of the new man? Does not Galatians 5:17 indicate competition? MacArthur teaches that though the old man died there is a “remnant of the old man” which remains with the believer [Romans 7:5]. If this is true, then Paul in Romans 7:25 should have said something

like this: “Oh wretched vestiges of the man I once was!”⁷

IF THE BELIEVER ONLY POSSESSES ONE NATURE, THE NEW NATURE IN CHRIST, THEN WHAT SHOULD WE EXPECT?

If this is really true, then we should expect the believer to be remarkably free from sin. We would expect the believer to outlive a quality of life which is truly exceptional. Indeed, John MacArthur has made the following statements:

(1) Christians will never be ashamed before the Judgment Seat of Christ.

In the *MacArthur Study Bible* under 1 John 2:28 he says this: “Those who are saved will have confidence at Christ’s coming because they will be blameless in holiness based on abiding in Christ. In contrast, there will be many, like the soils in Matthew 13, who are temporary look-alike believers, who did not believe, who did not persevere in abiding, and consequently, face only shame at His appearance.”

Elsewhere in his published writings Dr. MacArthur says that every true Christian abides in Christ (*Marks of a True Believer—1 John 2:18-4:21*, p. 34). This brings out MacArthur’s failure to properly distinguish between a believer’s standing and state. Positionally the believer is always and ever in Christ but as to his actual state, the believer does not always abide in the True Vine, though he is **commanded** to do so in 1 John 2:28. MacArthur teaches that true Christians will not be ashamed before Christ at His Judgment Seat and that it is only the unsaved who will be ashamed when Christ comes (see *Marks of a True Believer*, pp. 35-37).

⁷ For a full, 32 page analysis of John MacArthur’s one nature position, see our paper *The Teaching’s of John MacArthur Jr.* (\$5.00, over 120 pages). If you desire only the part of this paper dealing with MacArthur’s one nature position, the cost would be \$1.60. Ask for *John MacArthur’s One Nature Position*.

This is a very unnatural and forced understanding of 1 John 2:28. John is writing to the believers (“little children”) and he commands them to “abide in Him” (which implies that they can disobey the command). Why should they abide? “so that we may have confidence...and we might not be ashamed.” Why would John say these things if shame was an impossibility for them?

Note: Zane Hodges takes the very opposite position from that of MacArthur when it comes to the Judgment Seat. Hodges goes far to the other extreme by teaching that the Judgment Seat of Christ will be like hell! The verses which speak of “weeping and gnashing of teeth” and “outer darkness” he applies, not to the unsaved, but to believers and the Judgment Seat of Christ (see his book *Grace In Eclipse*).⁸ The true student of the Word needs to find the Biblical balance between these two extreme positions. “The pendulum swings, ridiculous extreme, bypassing truth which lies somewhere between.”

(2) Christians always have fellowship with God, and nothing, not even sin can break this fellowship.

“That genuine Christians are never ‘out of fellowship’ is clear, since this verse equates fellowship with salvation.” [1 John 1:3]

MacArthur understands the word “fellowship” in 1 John chapter one to mean “partnership” or “partnership in eternal life” (*Confession of Sin—1 John 1:1-2:2*, Moody Press, pp. 12-13). Thus since all believers share eternal life in common, then all believers have this fellowship. Since believers can never lose their eternal life, then they can never lose this fellowship. Again MacArthur fails to distinguish between standing and state, position in Christ and actual condition on earth. Positionally what Dr. MacArthur is saying is true, but experientially as the believer walks through time he does not always enjoy nor does he enter into the fullness of this eternal life which he possesses.

⁸ For a full discussion of the problematic teachings of Zane Hodges and Joseph Dillow see our booklet, *Evangelical Antinomianism* (\$2.00).

Here is what MacArthur says about “fellowship”:

“Being in the fellowship is the same thing as being saved. All Christians are in the fellowship. Don’t let someone come up to you and say, ‘You’re out of the fellowship,’ because that would be the same as saying, ‘You have lost your salvation.’...We will never be out of the fellowship because it’s a partnership in eternal life” (*Confession of Sin*, pp. 13-14).

“Whether or not a believer confesses his sin, he is still in the fellowship, because fellowship with God can’t be broken...a sinning believer isn’t out of the fellowship; he forfeits his joy” (*Confession of Sin*, p. 55).

MacArthur’s understanding of 1 John chapter one seems unnatural. It forces him to say that John’s purpose was to invite these people to salvation: “John wasn’t inviting the readers of his letter to a fellowship hall; he was inviting them to be saved...he wanted them to believe in Christ! He wanted them to have fellowship with the Father and the Son and to have eternal life” (*Confession of Sin*, p. 12). But the letter of 1 John was not written to unbelievers, it was written to believers (see 1 John 5:13—“These things have I written **unto you that believe on the Name of the Son of God**”). A natural reading of 1 John chapter 1 would indicate that John was writing these things to believers so that they might have fellowship and joy and know how to deal with sin in their lives.

(3) Christians are in the light and cannot walk in darkness.

“A genuine Christian does not walk in darkness but only in the light” [1 John 1:7].

Elsewhere in his published writings MacArthur says the same thing: “Believers are in the light; they cannot walk in darkness” (*Confession of Sin*, p. 28). MacArthur is correct in saying that believers are in the light. This is our glorious position in Christ as “children of light.” And yet when it comes to our actual walk in time, it is a sad but very true fact that believers do not always walk in the light, otherwise Paul’s command in Ephesians 5:8 (“walk as children of light”) would make no sense (why would he have to command the believer to do this if believers always do this?).

We would agree with MacArthur, however, in saying that a true

believer will not habitually walk in darkness as a way of life. But MacArthur goes too far when he makes statements like this: “Can a Christian walk in darkness? No. How can a Christian walk in darkness if he is one with God, in whom there is no darkness at all?” (*Confession of Sin*, p. 33,32). He then explains this as follows: “We may occasionally stumble and do deeds of darkness, but if we do, we do so in full light...in God’s sight, the blood of Christ continually cleanses us so that no darkness ever enters the light” (*Confession of Sin*, p.34 and p.28). As we shall see later, MacArthur teaches that God cleanses the sinning believer whether he confesses the sin or not.

In a later book, MacArthur even goes so far as to say this: “So all true believers are walking in the light—even when we sin” (*Faith Works*, p. 167).

Lewis Sperry Chafer made this distinction: “The believer may walk in the dark or in the light (1 John 1:5-6), but that is far different from being darkness, or being light” (*Ephesians*, p.145). John makes the same distinction. In 1 John 1:6-7 he says, “If **we**...walk in darkness...if **we** walk in the light...” The “**we**” refers to believers. Then in 1 John 2:9 he says, “**He** that saith he is in the light, and hateth his brother, is in darkness even until now.” Notice John says “**he**” not “**we**.” A Christian may walk in darkness (compare 1 Cor. 3:3), but it is only an unsaved person who is “IN DARKNESS.”

(4) Christians do not need to confess their sins in order to be forgiven.

See MacArthur’s study note under 1 John 1:9.

MacArthur’s teaching on 1 John 1:9 is more fully explained elsewhere in his published writings: “Confession of sin is not a condition for cleansing. Salvation is the only condition” (*Confession of Sin*, p. 48). “Whether or not a believer confesses his sin, he is still in the fellowship, because fellowship with God can’t be broken...a sinning believer isn’t out of the fellowship” (*Confession of Sin*, p. 55).

Dr. MacArthur goes against the traditional view of 1 John 1:9 which he calls “the conditional view”: “The most popular view of all is that forgiveness is conditional on confession: When a Christian sins, fellowship with God is broken and can only be

restored when the sin is confessed. Many of us have heard this formula: Sin breaks fellowship, and confession restores it. However, fellowship can't be broken, so that theory is out" (*Confession of Sin*, p. 52). "A believer can't have unforgiven sins" (*Ibid.*, p. 52).

How then does MacArthur understand 1 John 1:9? He teaches that this verse is a description of **every saved person**. Those who are truly saved are those who confess their sins, and these are the ones who have God's forgiveness and cleansing (that is, they are the ones who are saved). "God is forgiving those who are agreeing they are sinners...such a person shows evidence of being forgiven; he shows he is a true Christian...if you aren't confessing your sins and agreeing with what God says about sin, then you aren't among those being forgiven" (*Confession of Sin*, p. 52). Thus according to MacArthur, confession is not something that a believer does to be forgiven, but confession is something that a forgiven believer does (and something that a sinner must do in order to be saved).

Again this illustrates MacArthur's consistent failure to distinguish between the believer's standing in Christ and his actual state in time. That every believer is forgiven no one would dispute. This is the clear Biblical teaching, but this teaching relates to our standing in Christ and not to our walk in time. There is an aspect of forgiveness or cleansing which is very needful in the Christian life and walk. Our Lord made this very clear in John 13:8-10.

Peter had been washed completely (a picture of his salvation bath) but he still needed to have his feet washed (which is the cleansing spoken of in 1 John 1:9 and has reference to the believer's walk through time). Jesus said, "If I wash thee not thou hast no **part** (partnership, fellowship) with Me" (John 13:8). Fellowship was the issue, not salvation (just as in 1 John chapter 1). Peter was completely cleansed (John 13:10) but he still needed to be cleansed! Even so, believers are completely cleansed and forgiven, but when they sin they still need to be cleansed and forgiven, not in order to be or remain saved, but in order to enjoy a walk with God.

David was a saved man when he committed adultery and yet he prayed that his sins would be blotted out and that his iniquity would be washed away (Psalm 51:1-2). The same is true in Psalm 32:5 ("I

acknowledged my sin unto Thee...I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the LORD, and Thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin"). Certainly in these Old Testament passages forgiveness for sinning believers was conditioned upon confession. James 4:8 is another verse which indicates that believers with sin need to be cleansed (though MacArthur calls James 4:7-10 "the most comprehensive invitation to salvation in the epistles." (See *The Gospel According to Jesus*, p. 218.)

MacArthur fails to distinguish the forgiveness which is positional from the forgiveness which is experiential (pertaining to the believer's walk). The person who is not forgiven positionally does not have salvation—his sins are retained (John 20:23). The person who is not forgiven experientially does not enjoy the salvation that he has (Psalm 51:12). The person who has never had his salvation bath (positional forgiveness) will be CONDEMNED (1 Cor. 11:32); the person who does not allow Christ to take care of his dirty feet (experiential forgiveness) will be CHASTENED (1 Cor.11:31-32).⁹

(4) MACARTHUR'S TEACHING ON LORDSHIP SALVATION

Confess...the Lord Jesus (Romans 10:9). "This phrase includes repenting from sin, trusting Jesus for salvation, and submitting to Him as Lord" [Romans 10:9].

It is important to make a distinction between salvation and sanctification, between repentance and the fruits of repentance. In Romans 10:9 Paul is speaking about an initial confession of faith. It is one thing to confess Christ as Lord and it is another thing to actually submit to His Lordship. Every believer must confess Christ as Lord, but not every believer submits to Christ's Lordship as he should.

MacArthur's Lordship salvation position is hinted at in many of the notes, but is more fully stated in his published writings,

⁹ See our paper, *Two Aspects of Forgiveness* (5¢).

especially *The Gospel According to Jesus and Faith Works*.¹⁰

(5) MACARTHUR'S TEACHING THAT FAITH IS THE GIFT OF GOD

MacArthur's comments on Ephesians 2:8:

“That’ refers to the entire previous statement of salvation, not only the grace but the faith. Although men are required to believe for salvation, even that faith is part of the gift of God which saves and cannot be exercised by one’s own power. God’s grace is preeminent in every aspect of salvation” [Ephesians 2:8].

We need to be careful not to confuse the gift (salvation) with the reception of the gift (faith). It is interesting that the IFCA doctrinal statement makes a clear distinction between the gift and the reception of the gift: “We believe that **salvation is the gift of God** brought to man by grace and **received by personal faith** in the Lord Jesus Christ.”¹¹

(6) MACARTHUR'S DEPARTURE FROM DISPENSATIONALISM

In the introduction to this paper we discussed MacArthur's departure from dispensationalism in favor of a Reformed position.

¹⁰ For a full analysis of John MacArthur's position on Lordship salvation see our paper, *The Teachings of John MacArthur* (\$6.00) and also *Salvation By Grace—A Clarification of the Lordship Salvation Issue* (35¢, 20 pages).

¹¹ For a complete discussion of this question, see our paper, *What is the “gift of God” in Ephesians 2:8?* (25¢).

We now want to discuss some specific issues. The first involves MacArthur's understanding of the Church:

While God had since the beginning of redemptive history been gathering the redeemed by grace, the unique church He promised to build began at Pentecost with the coming of the Holy Spirit, by whom the Lord baptized believers into His body—which is the church [Matthew 16:18].

Here MacArthur is actually returning to a more solid dispensational position. In his commentary on Matthew, MacArthur taught the opposite: “**church** is used here (Matthew 16:18) in a general, nontechnical sense and does not indicate the distinct body of believers that first came into existence at Pentecost” (*Matthew 16-23*, page 30). He has also done a turn about with respect to Hebrews 12:23. In this same Matthew commentary (page 32) he taught that the “church” mentioned in Hebrews 12:23 referred to the redeemed of all ages, but in his study Bible note under Hebrews 12:23 he teaches that “the church of the firstborn” refers to NT believers in distinction from OT saints [Hebrews 12:23]. We are thankful that MacArthur has apparently returned to a more consistent dispensational understanding of the Church. Remember, one of the key teachings of Reformed Theology is that the church is made up of the elect of all ages, and we need to be careful to stay clear of this failure to distinguish carefully between Israel and the church.

MacArthur's teachings on the parables of Matthew 13 reflect a Reformed/traditional understanding and contradict standard dispensational teaching. For example, MacArthur makes the treasure and the pearl represent salvation and the man/merchant represents the sinner who gives up all that he has in order to be saved [see his note under Matthew 13:44-46]. There are problems with this view. In the other parables the man represents Christ, not the sinner (Matt. 13:37) and the field represents the world (v.38). Also the sinner does not seek the Saviour (Rom. 3:10) but it is the Saviour who seeks the sinner (Luke 19:10). Salvation is a free gift. It is not something we purchase. “*Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling.*” The issue in salvation is not what we do for God

(by way of surrender, sacrifice, etc.) but what God has done for us (by way of the cross).

MacArthur also runs counter to traditional dispensational teaching in his understanding of the parable of the mustard seed and the parable of the leaven. See his study note under Matthew 13:33.¹²

MacArthur has departed from dispensationalism and embraced Reformed Theology in many areas.¹³ One area where MacArthur has stayed true to dispensational teaching is the area of eschatology or prophecy. See his excellent summary of last things on pages 2197-2198 of his *Study Bible*. In light of this, why did John MacArthur allow men to be on his board of directors who were not in full agreement with the doctrinal statement of The Master's College and Seminary?

The example that I am aware of has to do with men who served on the board of directors who held to the Pre-Wrath rapture view. Rev. Roger Best is Executive Director of *The Sign Ministries*. This is a ministry devoted to promoting the Pre-Wrath rapture view. This is the Rosenthal/VanKampen position which teaches that the church will go through about 3/4 of the 7 year tribulation period. Roger Best also served on the board of directors of the Master's College and Seminary.

I wrote to Roger Best and asked him whether or not board members were required to sign the doctrinal statement of the school. The Master's College and Seminary has a strong statement in favor of pretribulationism. Has the school allowed men to serve on the board who were not in full agreement with the school's doctrinal statement? Here is the response I received from Roger Best in a letter dated 10/8/96:

¹² We have discussed these issues more fully in the paper *The Teachings of John MacArthur, Jr.* (\$6.00). See also our set of doctrinal worksheets entitled, *Shedding Light on Dispensations* (128 pages, \$2.00) and *Clarifying Statement on Dispensationalism* published by the New England Bible Conference (available from us for 10¢).

¹³ See our paper, *The Dangers of Reformed Theology* (40¢), for a full discussion of some of these important issues.

“Yes there are [two] men at the present time on the board of directors of the Master's College and Seminary who are not pre-trib....When we sign the doctrinal statement we do so marking the exception and that has been acceptable.

I wrote to the Master's College and Seminary three times asking them to clarify this matter, and although my letters were answered, I received no satisfactory response to specific questions which I asked.¹⁴ Dr. MacArthur has maintained membership in the IFCA even though he does not fully agree with the IFCA doctrinal statement, even as he has had board members who served at his school who did not fully agree with the school's doctrinal statement. It used to be that we would hold up a doctrinal statement and say, **“THIS WE BELIEVE!”** Apparently today some hold up a doctrinal statement and say, **“THIS SOME OF US BELIEVE”** or **“THIS WE BELIEVE IN PART.”**

(7) MACARTHUR'S TEACHING THAT THE GIFT OF PROPHECY IS FOR TODAY¹⁵

John MacArthur is generally very much on target when it comes to issues relating to the erroneous teachings of the modern charismatic movement. He has written some excellent books against the false teachings espoused by this movement. One area of concern, however, is Dr. MacArthur's teaching that the gift of prophecy is a gift still given to the Church today:

¹⁴ For a full discussion of this problem with complete documentation, see the chapter on “Separation and Integrity” in *The Teachings of John MacArthur* (\$6.00). To my knowledge there are no longer any board members or faculty members who hold to the “pre-wrath” view.

¹⁵ For a complete discussion of these issues, see our paper *The Modern Charismatic Movement*, \$1.00 (35 detailed pages).

“The speaking, or verbal, gifts (prophecy, knowledge, wisdom, teaching, and exhortation)...are all permanent gifts that will operate throughout the Church age” [1 Corinthians 12:4].

He defines the gift of prophecy this way:

“The meaning is simply that of ‘speaking forth,’ or ‘proclaiming publicly.’ Since the completion of Scripture, prophecy has not been a means of new revelation, but is limited to proclaiming what has already been revealed in the written Word” [1 Corinthians 12:10].

In his note on 1 Corinthians 14:3, MacArthur equates “the gift of genuine prophecy” with the “preaching of the truth.” What MacArthur teaches in his study notes is consistent with what he has written elsewhere: “The gift of prophecy was actually the ability to proclaim God’s Word...The gift, then, is the ability to speak before people, to proclaim God’s Word, sometimes with a predictive element.”¹⁶ According to this definition every true Pastor or Bible teacher would have the gift of prophecy. MacArthur denies the fact that prophecy is an actual message or oracle direct from the mouth of God (that is, prophecy=inspired speech). For a Biblical definition of prophecy see Exodus 4:15-16; 7:1-2; and compare 2 Peter 1:21.

Dr. MacArthur teaches that God gives some believers the gift of prophecy today but that there are no prophets today. He teaches that the office of the prophet (Eph. 4:11) is no longer to be found in the Church today but the gift of prophecy is (see his study note under Ephesians 4:11 and also *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary—1 CORINTHIANS*, pp. 322-324 and *EPHESIANS*, pp. 141-142). Thus a believer can have the gift of prophecy and can prophesy, but this person is not a prophet (this would be like saying that a person can have the gift of teaching and can teach but not be

¹⁶ *The Charismatics*, p. 164. See also *A Living Sacrifice—Romans 12:1-8*, Moody Press, pp. 50-51 where MacArthur teaches that the gift of prophecy is a permanent gift and he equates it with the gift of preaching.

a teacher, or a person can have the gift of pastoring but not be a pastor).

We need to rightly distinguish between prophecy and preaching. Hoehner makes this distinction as follows: “In the New Testament the verb form (*propheteuo*) is used 28 times and it always has (with the possible exception of John 11:51) the idea of revelation flowing from God...The consistent New Testament idea is that a prophecy is an actual message or oracle from God...In short, prophecy in Paul cannot denote anything other than inspired speech.”¹⁷

What does MacArthur do with 1 Corinthians 13:8-10 which says that prophecy and knowledge will be done away and tongues will cease? MacArthur’s position is that tongues did cease in the first century but that the gifts of prophecy and knowledge continue on throughout this age and will not be done away until the eternal state. See his study note under 1 Corinthians 13:8.¹⁸

CONCLUSION

In general the notes in *The MacArthur Study Bible* are helpful, give evidence of careful research and reflect a high view of God’s inerrant Word. For this we are thankful. The purpose of this paper is to point out some areas of concern with respect to several different doctrines, especially those that relate to the IFCA doctrinal statement.

Concerning the doctrine of the Sonship of Christ, MacArthur claims to have abandoned the “incarnational Sonship” position, although some of the notes in his *Study Bible* and *Commentary* still seem to reflect the incarnational Sonship view, that Sonship is merely a “role” that Christ assumed at the time of the incarnation.

¹⁷ Harold W. Hoehner, “The Purpose of Tongues in 1 Corinthians 14:20-25,” in *Walvoord: A Tribute*, Moody Press, pp. 56-57.

¹⁸ For further documentation on MacArthur’s position on 1 Corinthians 13:8 see his *1 CORINTHIANS* commentary, pp. 358-367.

We are told that these notes will eventually be corrected. The denial of the eternal Sonship of Christ is serious error which we have discussed at length elsewhere.¹⁹ We could only wish that MacArthur could be more clear on this important issue.

Concerning the doctrine of the extent of the atonement, MacArthur's notes in his *Study Bible* clearly indicate that Christ died as a Substitute and paid sin's penalty only for those who will believe (the elect). This is in clear conflict with Scripture and with the IFCA doctrinal statement which says that "the Lord Jesus Christ died on the cross for all mankind as a representative, vicarious, substitutionary sacrifice" (Section 3b). How MacArthur can be allowed to be a member of the IFCA when his position is in clear conflict with the doctrinal statement is a mystery indeed. It appears to be a clear violation of doctrinal integrity.

Concerning the doctrine of sanctification, MacArthur continues to deny that the believer has two natures. He teaches that the old man has experientially died and that only a "remnant of the old man" remains with the believer. How a residual part of the old man survived is never explained. The old man was crucified with Christ (Rom. 6:6) but somehow a part of the old man survived. This teaching flatly contradicts the IFCA doctrinal statement which says "We believe that every saved person possesses two natures" (Section 8).

MacArthur's teaching on Lordship Salvation is hinted at throughout the *Study Bible*, but is more thoroughly explained in MacArthur's writings elsewhere. The problem comes when we proclaim the gospel by emphasizing man's commitment, man's surrender, man's obedience, etc. in a way that detracts from the great saving work done on Calvary's cross. Salvation is not something that we do; it is something that God has done. Likewise, when

¹⁹ *The Eternal Sonship of Christ* by George Zeller and Renald Showers (Loizeaux Brothers). Also J.C. Philpot's classic work, *The Eternal Sonship of the Lord Jesus Christ*, has been reprinted by Old Paths Gospel Press (PO Box 318, Choteau, MT 59422) and is highly recommended.

MacArthur teaches that faith is the gift of God, he blurs the distinction between the gift and the reception of the gift. Also, if faith is the gift of God, then what must I, as a lost sinner, do to receive the gift of faith? Do I pray that God will give me this gift? If we tell sinners to pray for the gift of salvation, then we are perverting the gospel by making prayer, not faith, the condition for salvation.

Lordship salvation and faith as the gift of God are just two examples of doctrines which are commonly taught by Reformed men. MacArthur has been moving more and more towards Reformed Theology and more and more away from dispensationalism, except in the area of prophecy where, thankfully, he still makes proper dispensational distinctions.

MacArthur's teaching that God still gives the gift of prophecy might open the door to charismatic errors and also blurs the distinction between the gift of prophecy and the gift of teaching (or the gift of pastor/teacher). A teacher (or pastor) explains and expounds the Word of God; a prophet gives the Word of God. He is God's mouth-piece, God's spokesman (Exodus 4:15-16; 7:1-2).

In his promotional material for his *Study Bible*, the following claim is made:

"Unlike past 'classics' burdened by outdated theological systems, *The MacArthur Study Bible* strives to let the systems go, and let the Word of God speak." (See beginning of this critique.)

It is true that in many ways, though not totally, MacArthur has discarded dispensationalism, which he probably considers to be an outdated theological system. Yet he has not let all theological systems go. He has decidedly embraced a theological system known as Reformed Theology.²⁰ But regardless of theological systems, the key question is this: ***Has MacArthur really let the Word of God speak? Has he really let the Bible say what it really says?***

²⁰See our study, *The Dangers of Reformed Theology* (\$1.00).

The MacArthur Study Bible ~ A Critique

When we let the Word of God speak, does it really teach that Christ's Sonship is merely a role that He assumed at a point in time?

When we let the Word of God speak, does it really teach that Christ paid sin's penalty only for those who will believe, and not for all men?

When we let the Word of God speak, does it really teach that the believer only has one nature, the new nature in Christ?

May we search the Scriptures daily to see if these things are really so!

[George W. Zeller, 11/97 ; revised 10/99; 12/09]