

# Don Green Interviews John MacArthur

By Pastor John MacArthur

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Pastor Don Green: Well, it's a privilege to welcome all of you to Truth Community Church. As always, welcome to our members and regular attenders, we're so glad that you're with us, and for those of you that are visiting perhaps from other churches, we welcome you. We're so glad that you can share in this evening that God has granted to us. And if you're visiting and you don't have a church, we would love for you to learn more about our church. There are welcome packets on the round table out in the outer lobby that we would encourage you to pick up on the way out. If you need a church home, we would invite you to consider Truth Community Church. You get a little flavor of what we're about and what we're doing here this evening. With that said, I just want to kind of emphasize that it is as a local church that we're meeting here together this evening. This is not a radio rally. This is not anything that has been promoted in any way. We meet every Tuesday at this time, and this special occasion tonight comes in the natural flow of our church life and we thank God for that.

So it's my privilege now to introduce our speaker this evening. Our speaker tonight is the President of the Master's University and the Master's Seminary. I'm a graduate of the Master's Seminary but that's not why our speaker is here this evening. Our speaker tonight is the featured teacher on Grace to You, the worldwide Bible teaching program that is heard by millions each day. I served at Grace to You for 15 years, but that's not why our speaker is here this evening. Our speaker tonight is the author of the best-selling "MacArthur Study Bible, The Complete MacArthur New Testament Commentary Series," and scores of other biblical books and theological resources. I consult his work regularly in my pulpit preparation here at Truth Community Church, but that's not why our speaker is here this evening either. Our speaker tonight is the pastor of Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, California, where he has served continuously since 1969. There have been eight Presidents since the prior pastor served at Grace Community Church. Next February will mark his 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in that pastorate. My personal opinion is this and I was around long enough that I think I'm entitled to an opinion on this matter: no one has begun to understand our speaker tonight until they realize that he is first and foremost a pastor. He preaches God's word to the same flock over time. He leads elders. He makes hospital visits. He officiates funerals. He gives counsel. I've watched him personally in every one of those roles multiple multiple times. He loves his flock and, boy, does his flock love him. That's why our speaker is here tonight. We want to hear from a shepherd of Christ's flock. If I were half the pastor that our speaker is, I'd be

10 times the pastor that I am. Please join me in welcoming to our platform Pastor John MacArthur.

Pastor John MacArthur: Thank you.

Don: Glad to have you with us.

John: Thank you very much. Those were such kind words. Would you do my funeral?

Don: It was kind of like an audition.

John: Okay.

Don: But I'm hoping that funeral is not for another 30 years, John.

John: Thank you.

Don: You have been preaching God's word for 60 years, not just in the 50 years at Grace Church, you were ministering God's word 10 years prior to that, and I suppose this is kind of a funny way to ask the question but don't you ever get tired of it? What keeps you motivated after all of those years speaking God's word?

John: There isn't any sense at all in which this is wearying, old, stale. The word of God is alive. It is powerful. It is a living book. The Father has glory, the Son has glory, the Spirit has glory, and all their glory is reflected in the Scripture. It just explodes with its glory on my mind and my soul. There is as much joy in preparation now, and I just preached my 50<sup>th</sup> Easter sermon, there is as much joy now as there was at the very beginning. It has never diminished. Part of that, of course, is related not just to the content of Scripture which is inexhaustible, but to the Lord of Scripture, the unfathomable glory of the Lord. I never can get enough of Christ. Well, as you know, all those years through Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and then the people said, "Could you go back through John again?" So we did that again and then they said, "Do a series on Christ in the Old Testament." So we did that. The Old Testament is the anticipation of Christ; the Gospels the Incarnation of Christ; the book of Acts, the proclamation of Christ; the epistles the explanation of Christ; and the book of Revelation the glorification of Christ; and even he in Luke 24, went to the Old Testament and explained the things concerning himself. I find Christ everywhere in Scripture and you can never get enough of him. After all, we're going to spend the entire eternity gazing at his glory and I think we're just seeing the outer edges now.

Don: The word "Incarnate" and the word "written" become sweeter and sweeter the more you get to know them both.

John: Yeah, and I think there is a statement, and you've heard me say this for years, in 1 John where it talks about spiritual babies and spiritual young men and spiritual fathers, 1 John 2: a spiritual baby knows the Father, it's sort of spiritual Dada, there's kind of an

entry level understanding, and then a spiritual young man knows doctrine. We are able to defeat the evil one who primarily works in the area of false doctrine, but a spiritual Father knows him who is from the beginning. Long-term study of the word of God will introduce you to theology and then all of a sudden you will find yourself breaking through theology to the knowledge of God, and that's where the profound joys really are available.

Don: So what I hear you saying is you're going to keep doing this as long as the Lord gives you breath.

John: I do want to do that, and I tell them at the church, "Look, as long as I make sense, leave me there. When I don't make sense, get me out, but realize I won't know I don't make sense. So you might have a fight."

Don: John, you said, we spoke briefly a few days ago just kind of preparing for this evening and you said something that really struck me at the time. You said that when you were here, you did not want to be treated as a celebrity pastor, and I appreciated that, and one of the things that you said about ministry so often comes from 1 Corinthians 4:1, "Regard us as this, servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God." Explain for us how that perspective on ministry in the life of a pastor would shape the life of a local church.

John: You know, the big picture there is I'm 50 years into this and I have seen the word of God completely design and define and shape a church. Very rare that pastors stay long enough to see that, but you know this, I'm ministering to the third generation. I'm now involved in the spiritual growth of the grandchildren of the people that were there when I came and I am being introduced to the great-grandchildren. What Luther said was so important, he said, "I did nothing, the word did everything," and you understand that. You know that's what you're doing here. I did nothing. I didn't plan Grace Church. I didn't have some kind of scheme, dream, method. I basically said, "Look, let's just teach the word of God and see what the Lord does with his word," and transformed people who love Christ will love each other and they will also be concerned about the lost and the Gospel, and they will explode into ministry. So I never really started ministries, I just watched the word do its work in transforming lives, and as believers walked with Christ and grew and developed and their gifts became used and refined. You know, I'm at the end of this thing looking back and I never wanted to come to a point in my ministry where I wondered whether I did this or the Lord did this. I will never be the explanation for Grace Church. That's hard for them to get that, in a sense, but you know that. I am not the explanation. This is the explanation. Sometimes people think, "Well, you know, you're kind of doctrinal and kind of firm," and I just want to encourage people: strong preaching makes soft people, soft preaching makes hard people.

Don: What do you mean by that? Explain on that a little bit.

John: I mean, strong preaching of the word of God breaks down sin and it breaks down self-will, and it breaks down pride, and it humbles and softens and weakens the flesh, and

the Spirit can do his work. Soft preaching that it intends to manipulate people emotionally just leaves people in the hardness of their own hearts. So I think one of the surprises that people that come to Grace Church is like when they come to a Shepherd's Conference, they can't believe all the loving, caring service because if they're listening on the radio, you know, they hear me banging away at sound doctrine and the strong conviction. So all I've ever done is explain what the Bible meant to the people. Just, "This is what the Bible means," and in fact, you know I've never really been so much caught up in the application as the implication. Scripture has so much weight of its own that if you just place an accurate interpretation of a passage on someone's back who is a believer, the weight of that alone drives application in many directions.

Don: Now, kind of building on your longevity in ministry, you preached not too long ago at the memorial service for R. C. Sproul, spoke for maybe about 10 minutes or so, and you made a comment in that that really stood out to me; there was a poignancy to it related to your own ministry. You spoke about a meeting that you had with R. C. and a few other men, leaders, J. I. Packer, Bill Bright, and D. James Kennedy and Charles Colson, as I recall, and you made the point that the other five of those had gone on to glory and you used the phrase, "You're the last man standing," at least of those fruits. You have lived long enough and been in ministry long enough where a lot of your contemporaries have gone on to the Lord, I think of James Montgomery Boice, a man that we both respected, and as I thought about that, I wanted to ask you this: you've seen a generation come and go, you see another generation of preachers coming up behind you, tell us and explain to us your perspective with that in mind, how Christ builds his church over the ages and what the enduring power of Christ to fulfill his promise in Matthew 16, "I will build My church," talk to us about that and the work of Christ over generations to do his work.

John: Christ will build his church. He will accomplish it. He has chosen in eternity past and he, "All that the Father gives to Me will come to Me and I will lose none of them but raise them at the last day." The Lord will build his church, that strong confidence in the sovereign purpose of God. However on the other hand, I think it's not a guarantee that the church is going to be strong and I have to hold the other reality that a weak, ignorant, entertainment-centered church is not going to be the instrument that the Lord can use in a maximum level and is going to be very likely to produce half-Christians who are not genuinely converted. So I fear for the character of the church in the broad sense, and yet I have confidence in God's purposes. Now, I hold that tension in all theology. I am deeply burdened at what goes on in pulpits and what goes on in the name of Christ in churches.

Don: So-called.

John: Yeah, I'm saddened about that. I was talking to you a little earlier about the seeming indifference to the doctrine of sanctification. There are a lot of words being thrown around today in churches: relevant, millennial, missional. I don't hear holiness, purity, virtue, godliness. Those aren't the words that are in the conversation. So my passion, and you know this, is to raise up men who will do ministry biblically for the honor of the Lord, for the clarity of doctrine, for the sake of the advance of the kingdom,

and for their own joy. So I know the end will be as God wills it, but that would be true in my life. That gives me no excuse to sin and I don't think the church has any excuse for being anything less than God has designed it to be, and a shepherd for being anything less than God has designed him to be. And I think, and we're talking about students that come to the Master's University, Christian students, years ago they had biblical knowledge, they had sort of a general biblical knowledge, they grew up in the church. Today, they come from churches and have virtually no biblical knowledge. I don't know what's going on in their churches but they don't know the Bible. We grew up in church Sunday school listening to Bible stories, most of these contemporary churches have no Sunday school. They have nothing like that. They are just events.

So this is a scary time and here's the downside, one of the downsides, is you've got all these places and all these leaders claiming to be Christians and about every other day one of them crashes and burns in some kind of moral catastrophe which brings reproach on the name of Jesus Christ, and these are people who had no business ever being in those positions. So I'm not a doomsdayer in that sense, Don, you know. I know the Lord triumphs in the end but that gives us no excuse to be less than what he would want us to be for his honor.

Don: Thank you, John. That kind of leads into something else that I wanted you just to kind of expand on. I think that if you have a high view of Christ, you will necessarily have a high view of the church because Ephesians 5, "Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her." Galatians 2:20, "He loved me and gave Himself up for me." And a high view of Christ leads to a high view of his people. Talk to us a little bit about the love of Christ for his own; you know, let's kind of narrow it down more to the true church, to true Christians, about the love of Christ that sent him to the cross, and then what that means for his people as we look to him as we walk through this fallen world.

John: Okay, you just opened up a theological range.

Don: Good. Good. We can be here all night, so go for it.

John: Okay, so this is how to think about that, okay? Ephesians says, "You were chosen in Him before the foundation of the world." You and I and the bride of Christ have been in Christ since eternity past. You were chosen in Christ. This is a stunning reality. In the mind of God and for the purposes of God, for his eternal glory, you were in Christ before the foundation of the world. Your union with him started then in eternity past and it goes through eternity future. This is the dominating New Testament language to define a Christian: Christ in you, you in Christ. Now, that's Galatians 2:20, "I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live," which means I am raised with Christ, "yet not I, but Christ lives in me: and the life which I live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me." I don't know where Christ ends and I begin and that's why Paul in 1 Corinthians 6 says, "I can't indulge in a sin without joining Christ to that sin." I think the missing reality in Christianity today is that Christ is not someone I believe in, Christ is my life. Christ who is our life, he is my life. He is my love. He is my life and he is your life and when you come to me, Christ comes me. That's how I treat

another believer and Matthew 18 is so important because I'm treating him and treating Christ at the same time.

So I think the heart and soul of Christian love is to be literally engulfed in this incomprehensible grace gift of having been Christ's from before the foundation of the world. And I love this little phrase: even when you die, you'll be the dead in Christ. You'll still be and when your body is in the grave, it's still the dead in Christ. Your spirit is alive with him but that body is still Christ's. You are Christ's from eternity past to eternity future. He is our life and that's why Paul says in Galatians 4:19, "I am in labor pains until Christ is formed in you." He doesn't mean he's not there, he means he's there but he needs to fill you out. Or Colossians 1:28 and 29, Paul says, "Warning every man, teaching every man that I may present every man complete in Christ. He's in Christ but I want him to see the fullness of Christ." Paul talks about the fullness of God and the fullness of Christ.

So I think where Christ fills the life, where you see the fullness of Christ, you have the attributes of Christ being made manifest: love, joys, peace, gentleness, faith, goodness, meekness, self-control, all those things by the Spirit of Christ. So I think a congregation, the goal of the shepherd is to see a congregation that looks like Christ. Even as a teacher and a pastor, I should demonstrate the meekness and gentleness of Christ. I should reflect the mind of Christ. It's all about him. It's all about him and I think a congregation is almost unconscious of itself to preach to people and appeal to people on what God wants to do for them is counterproductive. What Christ wants to do to you is exalt himself through you and then you become fruitful and then there is joy. So this is why you know, you could say, "Well..." People used to say to me, "Why don't you go and do something else? You've done all this in this one congregation, why don't you go and do something else?" There are lots of people in our church in whom Christ is not fully formed and that's my flock that God gave me. That's not a job for me, that's my life. And Christ in me and Christ in them has created a love relationship that continues to grow and flourish, and after this many years, I can just tell you this: it's more wonderful and fulfilling now for all of us than it ever has been in the past because it grows and it just continues to flourish.

Don: Deeper all the way.

John: It does. No question.

Don: Now, two more questions because we want to leave all the time...

John: Yeah, leave me something to say when I get up there. I'll have to go back and prepare all over again.

Don: I think after 60 years you've got a pretty deep well to draw upon. I have confidence in you. John, you wouldn't know this but I know that there are a number of small church pastors, at least compared to Grace Church, small churches that are in the audience tonight, they are friends of mine. I just wanted to give you an opportunity to say a word

of encouragement to them as they seek to carry out what you just described in their own flock.

John: Yeah, just know this, it's never about the empty seats, it's always about the occupied ones. You get concerned about the empty ones and you'll forfeit your calling. You're never concerned about the empty seats, it's the occupied seats. But I would just say this, first of all, it's obvious that God prefers small churches to big churches because there are so many more small ones. I remember a young man came to Moody one time and he said, "I have a complaint." He said, "My congregation is too small." To which Moody replied, "Maybe they're as large as you'd like to give account for in the day of judgment." Okay. Because we will give an account.

Don: James 3:1, "Let not many of you become teachers."

John: Hebrews 13 says we're going to give an account. That's frightening to me.

Don: Me too.

John: Yeah, and I want to stay long enough so that I can minimize the trauma. So you should be happy with who you've got and love the occupied seats. Don't worry about the empty seats and the Lord will bring who he will bring. It's about the stewardship you read about. It's about being faithful, "It's required of stewards that a man be found faithful." Just be faithful to the truth. Proclaim the truth. You've heard me say this: you take care of the depth of your ministry and let God take care of the breadth of it. You work on the quality of your shepherding and let God take care of the quantity of the sheep. That's his part.

Don: Yeah. Well, John, let me just give you an open forum, an open platform with my final question: anything else on your heart that you would just say? Whatever's on your heart here, we would want to hear it and you don't need my prompt to express that.

John: Well, I just want to say one thing: there is no one that I respect more and trust more than this man right here, to be faithful to the Lord, to walk with the Lord, and to teach his word. I worked side-by-side with Don for 20 years and I know his heart, I know his passion, I know that God has his hand on him. Finding a trustworthy man is not easy. This is one.

Don: So will you do my funeral?

John: I will. The problem is we've got a reverse order here because I'm going to be... When your funeral comes, I'll be long gone.

Don: Alright.

John: I'll come back.

Don: Alright, yeah. Please do. Well, John, thank you so much for being with us. John is in the region to speak together for the Gospel later this week in Louisville. It worked out with his scheduled to be with us. Thank you for going out of your way, bringing Rich Gregory to be with us. We're going to sing a song and then we'll invite you to the pulpit.

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