



THE MACARTHUR
NEW TESTAMENT
COMMENTARY

THE MINISTRY OF
RECONCILIATION

A Special Study Excerpt From

2 CORINTHIANS

John MacArthur Jr.

Dear fellow student of the Bible,

When I began work on *The MacArthur New Testament Commentaries* in 1982, I had no idea that the project would be as far-reaching and well-received as it has been. My original goal, and that of Moody Publishers, was to produce a series of commentaries simple enough for lay people to use, yet meaty enough to be profitable for pastors and serious students. So it is deeply gratifying to know that people from every walk of life and every level of spiritual maturity have come to depend on these commentaries.

Starting when the first volume (Hebrews) was released, the demand for more has steadily grown. It seems everywhere I go, someone inevitably will ask when the next commentary is scheduled for release—and then encourage me to write faster!

I'm thrilled to help feed anyone's appetite for serious-minded study of God's Word. I'm especially grateful to Moody Publishers for their unwavering commitment to a series like this.

The commentaries are written to be as thorough and accurate as possible, but without being overly technical or unnecessarily academic. Devotional commentaries sometimes deliberately omit or gloss over verses and expressions that are difficult. Exegetical commentaries, on the other hand, can be so technical in their handling of the hard texts that when you're done reading, the complexity of the passage actually seems magnified—and the practical significance may be lost.

My goal is always to explain the text thoroughly, without ever dodging the hard questions, without neglecting the spiritual significance of God's Word, and without turning the process of biblical interpretation into a mere academic exercise.

These commentaries have been designed by Moody Publishers to be simple to use on a number of levels. They are wonderful reference tools, making it easy to turn directly to a specific verse or phrase for help in understanding what the text is saying. They also serve well as devotional reading. Many readers use them daily as the basis for a systematic personal study of God's Word. And because they deal thoroughly with every key phrase and word, many pastors and small group leaders have told me they regard the commentaries as indispensable resources for preparing their own lessons to teach.

No matter who you are or where you are in your study of God's Word, I think you will find *The MacArthur New Testament Commentaries* a valuable resource. This booklet includes a complete sample chapter so that you can get a feel for the style, substance, and layout. I hope these books will become trusted tools you often turn to as you seek to let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom (Colossians 3:16).

For the Master,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "John MacArthur". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and "M".

John MacArthur

“This commentary not only illuminates the biblical text, but has practical application that is personally beneficial, and also relevant for those teaching and preaching the Word. I personally turn to these commentaries often to help me interpret the text and find those transforming principles intended to change our lives.”

—Dr. Erwin W. Lutzer, Sr. Pastor,
The Moody Church, Chicago



TODAY'S CHRISTIANS ARE STARVING for substantial spiritual food.

The MacArthur New Testament Commentaries are both meaty and manageable. This commentary series will not only help you have a better, fuller, richer understanding of God's Word; they will also challenge you in your personal spiritual walk.

FOR WHOM ARE THEY DESIGNED?

Pastors and Bible Teachers:

The care and thoroughness with which John MacArthur explains the text of Scripture makes these commentaries indispensable tools for pastors and teachers. MacArthur's expositional approach is ideal for preachers who take seriously Paul's mandate to Timothy: "Preach the Word . . . in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction" (2 Timothy 4:2). The commentary is rich with timeless illustrative material (often drawn from Scripture itself), careful doctrinal instruction, and challenging exhortations. MacArthur's own preaching ministry is a model for thousands of pastors. The commentaries distill the very best of his study in a format pastors and teachers will love.

Students of Scripture:

John MacArthur says his primary goal is very specific: "to explain what Scripture means by what it says." Whether you're looking for answers to the hard questions, trying to unravel the meaning of a particularly difficult passage of Scripture, or seeking to sort out some difficulty related to doctrine or practical application, these commentaries will be a treasured resource you will turn to time and time again for help.

Every Christian:

Each verse and phrase is explained clearly and in simple terms, with the lay person in mind. You don't need a seminary degree or technical knowledge to make sense of what you're reading. Clear outlines, practical helps, cross-references, and plain-language explanations all work together to make the meaning of even the most difficult passages of Scripture crystal-clear. No matter who you are, these commentaries will vitalize and enhance your personal study of Scripture—bringing the Bible's meaning to life, feeding your appetite for God's Word, and showing clearly how God's truth applies to your own life.

*This excerpt is from chapter 15 of The MacArthur
New Testament Commentary on 2 Corinthians*

The Ministry of Reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18–20)

Observe How
John Develops
His Commentary

The Scripture
passage to
be studied:

Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. (5:18–20)

John introduces
his framework
for studying this
passage: varying
views of the
church's purpose
in today's world.

Today's church is confronted by a seemingly endless variety of ministry methods, strategies, and styles. Some argue that the church should agitate for social and political change to force cultural morality (moralism), or even help usher in the kingdom (postmillennialism). Others insist the church's message should be inoffensive, upbeat, and affirming, to create a positive atmosphere in which nonbelievers can feel welcome and not threatened (pragmatism). Still others believe their church's primary task is to defend its theological distinctives (denominationalism).

Faithful to the
text, John keeps
us focused on
what Scripture
tells us is the
primary mission
of the church.

But there is no confusion in Scripture about what the church's mission is to be—evangelism. This definitive passage clearly articulates the heart and soul of the church's responsibility as it represents Jesus Christ in the world. God has called all believers, especially pastors, to proclaim the message of reconciliation—a term which appears in some form five times in these three verses.

The glorious good news of the gospel is that the sin-devastated relationship between lost sinners and the holy God can be restored. That at first glance seems impossible. God's perfect, infinite, righteous justice demands the punishment of all who violate His law. Standing before the bar of His justice are helpless, guilty sinners, unable either to satisfy God

or to change their condition. But through God's plan of reconciliation all the hostility, animosity, and alienation separating the Holy One and sinners vanishes, and those who were once His enemies become His friends. The high calling and noble privilege of preaching this message of reconciliation is the most important duty in the world, since it deals with eternal destinations.

The gospel of reconciliation was the heart of Paul's preaching. To the Romans he wrote, "So, for my part, I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome. For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Rom. 1:15–16). Paul also expressed the burning desire of his heart to preach the message of reconciliation in his first inspired letter to the Corinthians:

For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in cleverness of speech, so that the cross of Christ would not be made void. . . . But we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness. . . . My message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power. (1 Cor. 1:17, 23; 2:4)

In Ephesians 3:8 he expressed the wonder that to him, "the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ." Paul never lost his focus on the simple, straightforward message that sinners can be reconciled to God through the cross of Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 2:2).

In this, the most theological section of this epistle, Paul gives a comprehensive statement of how God has made this reconciliation possible. The text reveals that reconciliation is by the will of God, by the act of forgiveness, and by the obedience of faith. (The next chapter of this volume, covering 5:21, will show that reconciliation is effected by means of substitution.)

RECONCILIATION IS BY THE WILL OF GOD

Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, (5:18)

The phrase **all these things** points back to the immediately preceding section of this epistle, which described the total transformation taking place at conversion (vv. 14–17). In

What Paul is experiencing, we are reminded, is what we should be experiencing.

John's outline points the way to understanding this passage:

- I. RECONCILIATION IS BY THE WILL OF GOD
- II. RECONCILIATION IS BY THE ACT OF FORGIVENESS
- III. RECONCILIATION IS BY THE OBEDIENCE OF FAITH

For a full understanding, John points to the importance of context. How does this passage fit into the surrounding text?

Here, we see an example of how John uses the O.T. to interpret and explain the N.T.

One of John's hallmarks: using Greek exegesis as a basis of doctrine and practical instruction. 6

that passage Paul described believers' death and resurrection in Christ as being transformed into new creatures. **All these things**, that is, those related to the transformation, come **from God** (cf. 1 Cor. 8:6; 11:12; James 1:17); sinners cannot be reconciled to Him on their own terms. Unregenerate people have no ability to appease God's anger against sin, satisfy His holy justice, or conform to His standard of righteousness. They are guilty of fatally violating God's law and face eternal banishment from His presence. The deadly, deceptive premise of all false religion is that sinners, based on their own moral and religious efforts and achievements, can reconcile themselves to God. But God alone designed the way of reconciliation, and only He can initiate the reconciliation of sinners; that **God . . . reconciled us to Himself** is precisely the good news of the gospel.

God so loved the world that He made the way of reconciliation. He desired to reconcile sinners to Himself—to make them His children. Such a desire is not foreign to God's holy character but consistent with it. One of the glorious realities of God's person is that He is a Savior by nature.

From before the foundation of the world, God freely and apart from outside influence determined to save sinners in order to eternally display the glory of His grace. He chose those He would rescue from His own wrath on sin and wrote their names in the Book of Life. He is no reluctant Savior; in fact, Scripture frequently gives Him that title (Ps. 106:21; Isa. 43:3, 11; 45:15, 21; 49:26; 60:16; 63:8; Hos. 13:4; Luke 1:47; 1 Tim. 1:1; 2:3; 4:10; Titus 1:3, 4; 2:10, 13; 3:4, 6; Jude 25).

From Genesis 3:8–9 where God said, "Where are you?" He has been seeking to save sinners. Ezekiel 34:16 says, "I will seek the lost, bring back the scattered, bind up the broken and strengthen the sick." He Himself is the eager reconciler, as Paul wrote to the Romans:

Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. And not only this, but we also exult in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation. (Rom. 5:9–11)

It is to God's plan through Jesus Christ that we owe the gratitude for our reconciliation.

Both the verb *katallassō* (**reconciled**) and the noun *katallagē* (**reconciliation**) appear in the New Testament only in Paul's writings. The terms always portray God as the reconcil-

er and sinners as the ones reconciled, since it was human sin that ruptured the relationship between God and man (cf. Isa. 59:2). In Romans 5:11 Paul declares, “We also exult in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation.” To the Ephesians Paul wrote,

But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, so that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity. (Eph. 2:13–16)

Colossians 1:20–22 affirms that God chose

through [Christ] to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven. And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds, yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach.

Thus, reconciliation is not something man does but what he receives; it is not what he accomplishes but what he embraces. Reconciliation does not happen when man decides to stop rejecting God but when God decides to stop rejecting man. It is a divine provision by which God’s holy displeasure against alienated sinners is appeased, His hostility against them removed, and a harmonious relationship between Him and them established. Reconciliation occurs because God was graciously willing to design a way to have all the sins of those who are His removed from them “as far as the east is from the west” (Ps. 103:12), “cast all their sins into the depths of the sea” (Mic. 7:19), and “cast all [their] sins behind [His] back” (Isa. 38:17).

In the most magnanimous expression of sacrificial love the universe will ever know, God reconciled believers to Himself **through Christ**; that is, at His expense. God the Son’s perfect sacrifice is the only one that could satisfy the demands of God the Father’s holy justice. Jesus Christ is the only Mediator between God and man (1 Tim. 2:5; cf. Heb. 8:6; 9:15; 12:24), and “there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). God, for His own purpose and

After accurately defining terms, John explains the relationship between man’s contribution and God’s to the unfolding of salvation.

Jesus is the only source – and the only means – of salvation.

by His own will, designed the sacrificial death of His Son to reconcile believers to Himself:

But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, so that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity. (Eph. 2:13–16)

“[Christ] has now reconciled [them] in His fleshly body through death,” making them “holy and blameless and beyond reproach” in the sight of God (Col. 1:22). “Now once at the consummation of the ages [Jesus Christ] has been manifested to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself” (Heb. 9:26); “He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down at the right hand of God” (Heb. 10:12). His sacrifice propitiated God’s holy wrath (Rom. 3:25; Heb. 2:17; 1 John 2:2; 4:10), making reconciliation possible.

It is to all reconciled people that God gives **the ministry of reconciliation**. This is equal to the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19–20) and all calls to proclaim the gospel. *Diakonia* (**ministry**) denotes humble service, such as serving meals (cf. Luke 10:40; Acts 6:1). But though the messengers may be humble (see the discussion of 4:7 in chapter 10 of this volume), the message they proclaim to the lost world is the most exalted one ever proclaimed.

RECONCILIATION IS BY THE ACT OF FORGIVENESS

namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. (5:19)

The phrase *hōs hoti* (**namely**) introduces Paul’s explanation of how **God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself**. The phrase **in Christ**, along with the phrase “through Christ” in verse 18, identifies the Son of God as the agent of reconciling. The phrase **in Christ** identifies the way that agency operates—by union between the believer and the Savior. All who are **in Christ** become “ambassadors for Christ” (v. 20).

Now let us consider the second of John’s outline points:

- I. RECONCILIATION IS BY THE WILL OF GOD
- II. RECONCILIATION IS BY THE ACT OF FORGIVENESS
- III. RECONCILIATION IS BY THE OBEDIENCE OF FAITH

The phrase **reconciling the world** must not be understood as teaching universalism, the false doctrine that all people will be saved. If God has reconciled the world, universalists simplistically argue, then the barrier between God and man has been removed for all, and everyone will be saved.

Scripture does teach that there is a sense in which Christ died for the whole world. John the Baptist declared of Him, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). In the familiar words of John 3:16, “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.” The Bible twice calls Jesus Christ “the Savior of the world” (John 4:42; 1 John 4:14). Jesus declared in John 6:51, “I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread also which I will give for the life of the world is My flesh.” First Timothy 2:6 says that He “gave Himself as a ransom for all;” Hebrews 2:9 says that “by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone”; and 1 John 2:2 says that “He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world.”

Those passages cannot mean that Christ actually paid the penalty for everyone’s sins, because the Bible teaches that most people will suffer eternal punishment in hell (Matt. 25:41, 46; 2 Thess. 1:9; Rev. 14:9–11; 20:11–15; cf. Ezek. 18:4, 20; Matt. 7:13–14; Luke 13:23–24; John 8:24), and few will be saved (Matt. 7:13–14). If Christ paid the penalty for everyone’s sins, how could God sentence people to hell for sins that Christ bore the punishment for? And if He did not pay for the sins of those who are eternally lost, then in what sense was **God . . . in Christ reconciling the world to Himself?**

The answer to that apparent dilemma is that the universal language (e.g., “world,” “all,” “everyone”) in the above-mentioned passages must be understood as referring to mankind in general. Christ did not die for all men without exception, but for all men without distinction. **World**, in this context, indicates the sphere in which reconciliation takes place; it denotes the class of beings with whom God seeks reconciliation—people from every national, racial, and ethnic group.

Christ’s death *does* have infinite and unlimited value, because He is the infinite Son of God. His sacrifice is sufficient to pay the penalty for the sins of as many or as few as God saves. Because the intrinsic merit of Christ’s death is unlimited, the offer of salvation is legitimately unlimited as well. Therefore the general call to salvation goes out to all men (Isa. 45:22; 55:1;

In his analysis, John is careful to use the original languages in a practical way.

John corrects misconceptions that lead to error.

Each commentary is based on a precise and accurate definition of terms and concepts.

Matt. 11:28; 22:14; Rev. 22:17); “God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent” (Acts 17:30); and believers can call every person in the world to come to Christ (Matt. 28:19; Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8). But though the gospel is freely offered to all, Christ’s death actually expiated only the sins of those who would believe.

God has determined from all eternity those who would believe in the Lord Jesus Christ; “He chose [them] in Him before the foundation of the world” (Eph. 1:4), and their names have “been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who has been slain” (Rev. 13:8; cf. 17:8; 21:27). God designed the atonement of Jesus Christ to be efficacious only for those people and actually pay the penalty for their sins alone. For that reason, Scripture also presents a narrow perspective of the beneficiaries of Christ’s death. In John 10:11 Jesus declared, “I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep,” while in verse 15 He added, “I lay down My life for the sheep.” In His high-priestly prayer Jesus said, “I ask on their behalf; I do not ask on behalf of the world, but of those whom You have given Me; for they are Yours” (John 17:9). God “did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all . . . God’s elect . . . those whom He [justifies]” (Rom. 8:32–33). “Husbands, love your wives,” Paul admonished, “just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her” (Eph. 5:25).

It is helpful in this context to insert part of my exposition of 1 Timothy 4:10 from another volume in this commentary series. That verse reads, “For it is for this we labor and strive, because we have fixed our hope on the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of believers.” Commenting on that text I wrote,

In what sense God **is the Savior of all men, especially of believers** has been much disputed. Some, wanting to eliminate the scriptural teaching of an eternal hell, argue that Paul here teaches universalism, that all men will be saved. That view violates the basic hermeneutical principle known as *analogia Scriptura*. According to that principle, the Bible never contradicts itself. It will never teach something in one passage that violates what it teaches elsewhere.

The Bible clearly teaches that those who reject God will be sentenced to hell (Rev. 20:11–15). Matthew 25:41 and 46 state that the duration of that punishment will be eternal.

John honors the glory and sovereignty of God.

A key feature: examining “problem passages” that are relevant to the text.

Second Thessalonians 1:8–9 says that those who do not know God and refuse to obey the gospel will suffer eternal punishment away from God’s presence. Jesus repeatedly spoke of the danger of hell (Matt. 8:12; 13:41–42, 49–50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30; Luke 13:28). He solemnly warned those who rejected Him that they would die in their sins (John 8:24). Universalism is undeniably contrary to Scripture, since the same words in the original that describe hell as eternal also describe God and heaven as eternal.

A second view might be dubbed the potential/actual view. According to this view, Christ is potentially the Savior of all men, but actually only of those who believe. It is true that Christ’s death was powerful enough to have redeemed the whole human race and to satisfy the justice of God and remove the barrier between God and all men. Therefore, all can be called to salvation and justly damned if they refuse that call. By means of Christ’s death, God made provision for the sins of the world (cf. the discussion of 1 Tim. 2:6 in chapter 6 of this volume).

That such is not the teaching of this verse, however, is revealed by the use of the adverb *malista* (**especially**), which must mean that all men will enjoy to some extent the same kind of salvation as **believers** enjoy. The adverb is not adversative or contrastive, it cannot be saying that **all men** are saved in one sense, but believers in another. The difference is one of degree, not kind.

It seems best to understand this verse to be teaching that God is really the Savior of all men, who actually does save them—but only in the temporal sense, while believers He saves in the eternal sense. In both cases, He is their Savior and there is a saving that He does on their behalf. In this life, all men experience to some degree the protecting, delivering, sustaining power of God. Believers will experience that to the fullest degree for time and for all eternity.

The word **Savior** is not always in Scripture limited to salvation from sin. In the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, *sotēr* (**Savior**) is sometimes used in the lesser sense of “deliverer” (cf. Judg. 3:9; 2 Kings 13:5; Neh. 9:27). Words in the same word group occasionally have that sense in the New Testament as well (cf. Luke 1:71; Acts 7:25; 27:34; Phil. 1:19; Heb. 11:7). A related word, *sōzō* (“to save”) is used in the Gospels to refer to physical healing (Matt. 9:21–22; Mark 5:23; Luke 8:36, 50; John 11:12; cf. Acts 4:9). God **is the Savior of all men** in that He withholds the death

Authenticity is central to John’s approach. Here we see how he uses sound hermeneutical principles to refute contemporary errors.

A skilled teacher, John makes technical data easy to understand.

For greater comprehension John is careful to explain the Scriptural use of terms.

and judgment all sinners should receive because of sin (cf. Ezek. 18:4, 32; Rom. 6:23). The reality that God delivers men from instant damnation and does “good and [gives them] rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying [their] hearts with food and gladness” (Acts 14:17) shows He is the Savior of all. He graciously gives “to all people life and breath and all things” (Acts 17:25), and “causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matt. 5:45). He gives common grace to all men. Unbelievers experience God’s goodness and mercy in that they are not instantly killed for their sin. Nor does He give them constant pain and permanent deprivation. They experience His temporal blessings in this life.

That principle is illustrated in Isaiah 63:8–10:

For He said, “Surely, they are My people, sons who will not deal falsely.” So He became their Savior. In all their affliction He was afflicted, and the angel of His presence saved them; in His love and in His mercy He redeemed them, and He lifted them and carried them all the days of old. But they rebelled and grieved His Holy Spirit; therefore He turned Himself to become their enemy, He fought against them.

Verse 8 says God became Israel’s Savior. He brought the nation out of Egypt, and cared for them. He provided food, water, and deliverance from their enemies. That He was not the Savior in a spiritual sense of every Israelite is clear from verse 10, which says He became their enemy and fought against them. That passage is analogous to Paul’s thought in 4:10. God **is the Savior of all men** in the temporal sense, and **especially of believers** in the spiritual sense that they are delivered from sin’s penalty forever! (The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: *1 Timothy* [Chicago: Moody, 1995], 167–69)

The phrase **not counting their trespasses against them** reveals the means of reconciliation—the forgiveness of sins. Only by having the guilt of sin forgiven can sinners be reconciled to God, since it is sin that separates them eternally from Him. Isaiah wrote, “Your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you so that He does not hear” (Isa. 59:2). “You and your sins must separate,” warned Charles Spurgeon, “or you and your God will never come together” (“Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth,” in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, vol. 21 [Pasadena, Tex.: Pilgrim, 1980], 88).

Throughout his commentaries John uses the O.T. to illustrate the meaning of the passage at hand.

John shows how our relationship to our sin must change – and is changed – by salvation in Christ.

Like the gracious king in the Lord's parable (Matt. 18:27), God freely forgives repentant and believing sinners, canceling their unpayable debt and reconciling them to Himself (1 Cor. 1:30; Phil. 1:11; 3:9; 2 Peter 1:1; cf. Isa. 61:10). Expressing the exhilaration of forgiveness David wrote, "How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered! How blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute iniquity" (Ps. 32:1–2). In Romans 4:8 Paul echoed that glorious reality, writing, "Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account." Earlier in that chapter he described God as "Him who justifies the ungodly" (v. 5; cf. Rom. 3:26), while he reminded the Colossians that God has "forgiven us all our transgressions" (Col. 2:13). Christ died in the place of believers, paying the penalty for their sin and bearing its guilt. Their sin is no longer charged to their account and never will be again (cf. Rom. 8:31–39). All debts have been fully paid by Christ's righteousness imputed to their account (cf. the discussion of 5:21 in chapter 16 of this volume).

To all those whom He has reconciled, God **has committed** (*tithēmi*; lit., "placed" or "set") . . . **the word of reconciliation**. Paul was so overwhelmed with the responsibility and privilege of preaching the message of reconciliation, which is the ministry of reconciliation mentioned in verse 18, that he clarified that truth here. *Logos* (**word**) is more than just a synonym for "message," as Philip E. Hughes explains:

In Greek thought, *logos* indicates what is true and trustworthy as opposed to the term "myth" (*mythos*) which is descriptive of what is fictitious and spurious. Socrates, for example, declares that a particular story is "no fictitious myth but a true *logos*." Hence the term "logos" carries with it, like a kind of overtone, the implication of truth and genuineness, and is accordingly peculiarly appropriate as a synonym for the gospel, which is "the word of truth." (*The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992], 207)

Scripture therefore describes the message of reconciliation as the word (*logos*) of the kingdom (Matt. 13:19), salvation (Acts 13:26), the gospel (Acts 15:7), the cross (1 Cor. 1:18), life (Phil. 2:16), and truth (Eph. 1:13; Col. 1:5). In a world of religious myths, Christians proclaim the truth about the only way that people can be reconciled to God and, thereby, escape hell and enjoy heaven forever.

Drawing on related passages from the O.T. and N.T., John shows how blessed we are because of what Jesus has done for us.

To add still more dimension, John calls attention to good background material.

RECONCILIATION IS BY THE OBEDIENCE OF FAITH

Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. (5:20)

While it is true, as noted above, that God alone is the reconciler, reconciliation nevertheless does not happen apart from the sinner's faith. **Therefore**, Paul wrote, **we are ambassadors for Christ** (cf. Eph. 6:20). As in our day, being an ambassador in ancient times was an important and highly regarded duty. **Ambassadors** is a form of the verb *presbeuō*, which derives from *presbus* ("old man"). The term is an apt one, for ambassadors in ancient times were usually older, experienced men. An ambassador is both a messenger for and a representative of the one who sent him, and believers are messengers and representatives of the court of heaven. And just as an ambassador lives in a foreign land, so also do believers. Though citizens of heaven (Phil. 3:20), they represent their King in this world, where they live "as aliens and strangers" (1 Peter 2:11). They proclaim to the lost, perishing rebels of this fallen world the good news that they can be reconciled to the holy King of heaven:

For "Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved." How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher? How will they preach unless they are sent? Just as it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news of good things!" (Rom. 10:13–15)

Because believers are His ambassadors, it is **as though God**, the Savior Father, **were making an appeal** to the lost **through** them. **We beg** unbelievers also **on behalf of** the Savior Son, **Christ**, to **be reconciled to God**. This begging of people to be reconciled makes it clear that the sinner is never delivered from wrath and judgment to blessing and reward without personal response to the truth of the gospel through the means He has provided—faith. In John 6:47 Jesus said, "He who believes has eternal life" (cf. v. 40; 1:12; 3:16, 18, 36; 5:24; 1 John 5:13). God is "the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Rom. 3:26), because "a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law" (Rom. 3:28, cf. v. 30). In a passage demonstrating that Abraham was justified by faith alone Paul wrote, "But to

Now we turn to the third of John's outline points:

- I. RECONCILIATION IS BY THE WILL OF GOD
- II. RECONCILIATION IS BY THE ACT OF FORGIVENESS
- III. RECONCILIATION IS BY THE OBEDIENCE OF FAITH

John reminds believers of their responsibility to evangelize the lost.

the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness” (Rom. 4:5). It is those who have “been justified by faith” who “have peace with God” (Rom. 5:1). To the Galatians, under assault by legalistic heretics teaching salvation by works, Paul wrote

Nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, so that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified. . . . Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for, “The righteous man shall live by faith.” . . . Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, so that we may be justified by faith. (Gal. 2:16; 3:11, 24)

Paul wrote to the Philippians that his hope of salvation in Christ was “not [based on] having a righteousness of [his] own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith” (Phil. 3:9).

The objective element of saving faith involves believing that Jesus is God (John 8:24), that God raised Him from the dead (Rom. 4:24; 10:9), that there is salvation in no one else (John 14:6; Acts 4:12), and confessing Him as Lord (Rom. 10:9). But there is an often-overlooked subjective element of saving faith, a humble attitude of mourning over sin, repentance, and pleading with God for mercy. James wrote, “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you” (James 4:8–10; cf. Matt. 5:3–11).

Paul saw his mission, as Christ’s ambassador as one, “to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for His name’s sake” (Rom. 1:5). The Lord Jesus Christ assigned that same mission to all believers when He commanded them, “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19). There is therefore no higher calling, no greater privilege, no more urgent task than the ministry of reconciliation God has entrusted to all believers.

In the best teaching tradition, John helps us to avoid extremes.

Here, we see how John balances the objective elements of the gospel with the subjective responsibility we have.

John demonstrates how the text calls all believers to be involved in the work of God.



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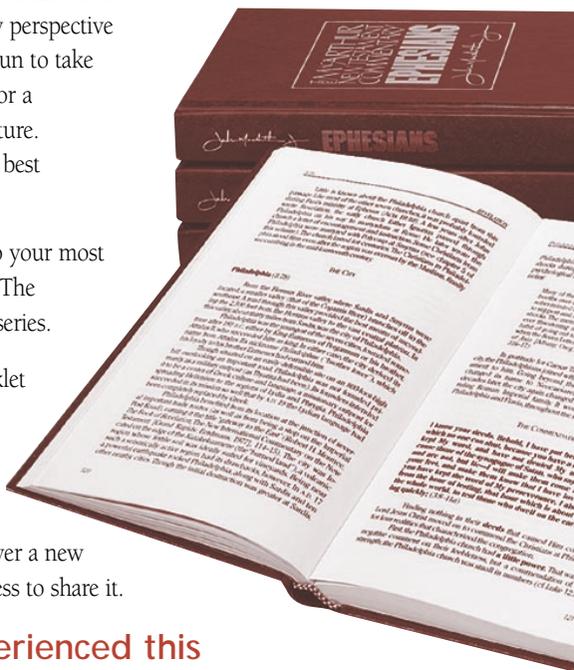
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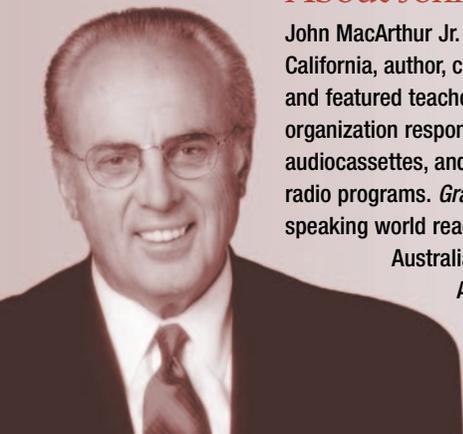
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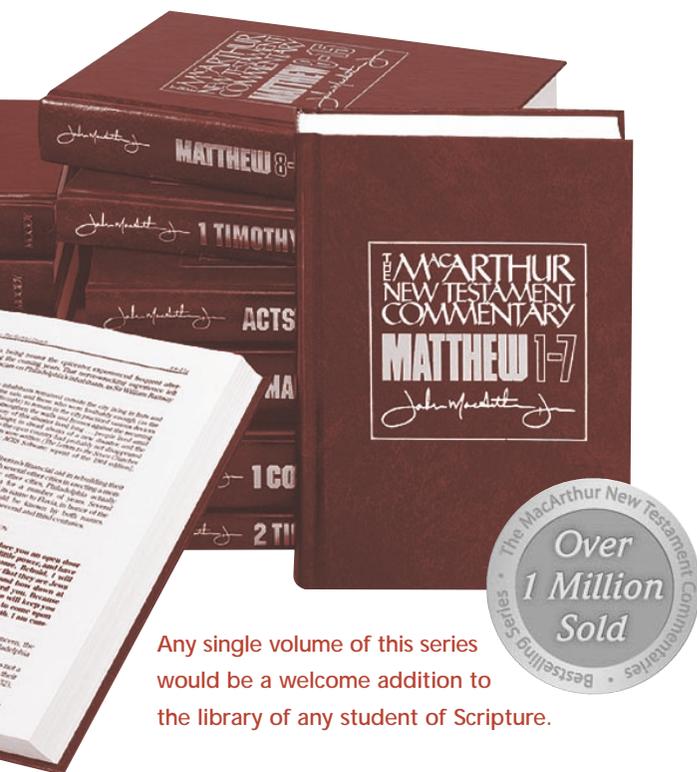
About John MacArthur, Jr.

John MacArthur Jr. is pastor-teacher of Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, California, author, conference speaker, president of The Master's College and Seminary, and featured teacher with *Grace to You*. Founded in 1969, *Grace to You* is the nonprofit organization responsible for developing, producing, and distributing John's books, audiocassettes, and the *Grace to You*, *Portraits of Grace*, and *Grace to You Weekend* radio programs. *Grace to You* airs more than 1,500 times daily throughout the English speaking world reaching all major population centers in the United States, as well as Australia, Canada, Europe, India, New Zealand, the Philippines, and South Africa. John has written more than six-dozen books that have sold millions of copies worldwide.



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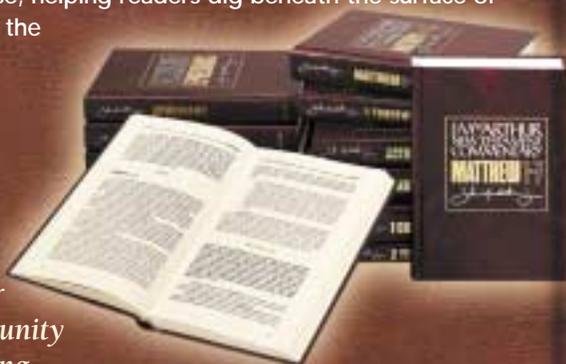
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