

A BRIEF ACCOUNT OF JOHN MACARTHUR'S PUBLIC MINISTRY

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This volume celebrates John MacArthur's 25th anniversary as founding president of The Master's Seminary—a remarkable landmark. For those of us who have been here since the beginning, as we look back on that quarter-century, it seems a very short time. But it's almost exactly half the number of years John has spent in public ministry. Fifty years of preaching, virtually all of it recorded for posterity, reminds us that John is first of all an outstanding preacher of God's Word. All the other hats he wears—as an educator, author, media figure, encourager, discipler of men, and role model for pastors worldwide—are secondary and subordinate to his weekly ministry from the pulpit of Grace Community Church.

The first sermon John ever preached was during his college years, and the message *wasn't* recorded. It wasn't delivered in a church, either, but in the open air. John was part of a student gospel team doing music and evangelism. The team leader dropped him off at a bus depot in Spartanburg, South Carolina, telling him his assignment was to gather a crowd and preach. It was an awkward assignment for which John was completely unprepared.

"The sermon was terrible," he says. "I didn't know how to do it right. I went in there—had my Bible in my hand—and I walked into this mostly-empty bus depot. And I'm looking around this motley bunch and so I just started preaching a gospel message. You could just see people looking at me saying, 'The poor kid! He looks intelligent. It's so sad; he must have some kind of disability.'

"And I thought, *You know, this doesn't make any sense at all.* So I did it for about ten minutes and then I walked out the door and I went down the street where there was a high school dance beginning—and I just sat outside and gave the gospel to kids as they went in and out. That's how I got my start preaching. It wasn't memorable at all. But after that I was eager to *learn* to preach, because I was determined to be ready whenever I was called on to preach. I would go to rescue missions and military bases to preach when I could. Over time, I learned how to connect with an audience."

In his early college career, John's central passion was athletics. A superb multi-sport competitor, he was considering opportunities for a

professional sports career. (At one point, he was recruited by the Washington Redskins, who were impressed with his skills as a halfback.)

But all that changed in an instant on a remote Alabama highway during a cross-country road trip between semesters. Six students were traveling together in a two-door Ford Fairlane when the driver lost control. The car apparently drifted off the edge of the shoulder, and the driver reacted too forcefully, over-correcting. The car went airborne, the passenger's side door opened, and John MacArthur was ejected. Seat belts were virtually unheard of in those days, but John was the only student thrown from the car. Fortunately, no one else was seriously injured. The open door kept the car from rolling over completely. It landed upside down and just spun to a stop.

John, however, was propelled on his back onto the asphalt at nearly seventy miles per hour. When his body stopped skidding, he was more than a hundred yards from the point where he left the car; he had sustained serious abrasions and third-degree friction burns on his back—but no broken bones. And he was still fully conscious when the long skid finally ended. He stood up, walked to the edge of the road, and stood there bleeding by the highway. He says that before the dust from the accident even settled, he had surrendered his life to the Lord for full-time ministry.

The healing process was unbelievably painful. Alabama doctors applied strips of gauze soaked with an ointment called Furacin to the burns, wrapping the patient like a mummy—then shipped him home to California. California doctors decided the Furacin strips needed to be peeled off, which was a long and painful ordeal—far worse than the original accident. John lay on his stomach in various states of discomfort for three months. The pain slowly gave way to severe itching, and the ordeal seemed as if it would never end. “But,” John says, “by the time I had recovered, I was truly ready to do whatever God wanted me to do.”

As it turned out, John's athletic career was by no means over. He transferred to Los Angeles Pacific College, where he was able to play three sports—football, baseball, and basketball. But now he regarded sports only as means to a greater end. “It became a platform for me to give my testimony and have a ministry,” he says. For example, after being named Player of the Week in football, he was invited to speak at a Kiwanis Club luncheon. “I just got up and gave my testimony about Christ,” he remembers. After that luncheon, a man approached John and told him about a girl who had recently been shot through the neck by an angry boyfriend. The bullet had penetrated her spinal column and left her a quadriplegic. This former head cheerleader was still hospitalized and suffering severe depression, and the man asked John if he would visit her and share the gospel with her. John did, and he led her to Christ.

Recalling that incident, he says, “It was so incredible that God could use me to bring this young woman to Christ when she had been a quadriplegic for only a week or two. She even went on to marry a Christian guy who cared for her. And I said, ‘You know, *this* is what matters.’”

But as if to test his resolve, professional football teams seemed to step up their recruiting efforts. When the Cleveland Browns' star wide receiver, Paul Warfield, broke his collarbone in practice, the team contacted John MacArthur to see if he would be interested in signing as a backup. "No," he told them. "I'm going to seminary."

Now fully committed to preparing for full-time ministry, John began to excel academically. He graduated in 1961 with a major in religion and a double minor in Greek and history. Three years later he graduated *magna cum laude* from Talbot Theological Seminary, where he majored in biblical exposition. Just before his final year in seminary, in August of 1963, John married Patricia, and the eldest of their four children (Matt, Marcy, Mark, and Melinda, in that order) came a year later, not long after John's graduation from seminary.

During and after those years in seminary, John served as assistant pastor to his father in a Burbank church. He also became a much sought-after speaker for church conferences, family camps, and youth groups. A year or so after graduating from seminary, he joined the staff of Talbot Seminary as an extension speaker. Itinerant speaking occupied John full-time for the next three years. For two months every summer, he was the featured speaker at Hume Lake Summer Camp. On most Sundays during the rest of the year, he filled pulpits for various southern California churches.

John's desire, however, had always been to pastor a church. By 1968, he was convinced it was time to pursue that goal. He had always believed strongly that the church is the center and focus of God's work in the world. Itinerant ministry gave him an exposure to a broad range of churches and denominations. Many of them were struggling churches lacking full-time pastors, and John had a burden to help them all. But he had a growing conviction that he could do more to strengthen churches by anchoring his ministry within a single church and modeling what pastoral and church ministry ought to be, rather than always speaking from the perspective of a visiting preacher.

In September of that year, Dr. Richard Elvee, senior pastor of Grace Community Church, Sun Valley, CA died of a heart attack in the church office. The church's elders, familiar with John MacArthur through his conference speaking, invited him to candidate for the pastoral position. A couple of other churches had previously considered calling John, but their pulpits committees had decided he was too young.

His youthfulness was a tremendous advantage in the eyes of Grace Church's elders, though. The church had lost two successive senior pastors to heart attacks in less than five years. They were looking for a younger man who might lead the church for many years to come. That foresight was spot on, and it is clear today that the Lord's hand was in it. The candidating process moved quickly, and in January of 1969 the elders extended an invitation for John MacArthur to become the third pastor of Grace Community Church. John, only 29 at the time, stepped into the pulpit as senior pastor for the first time on Sunday morning, February 9, 1969. The sermon he gave that morning, "How to

Play Church,” is still one of the most-listened-to messages in the catalogue of John’s sermon recordings.

Grace Church had been growing consistently in numbers and in depth since its founding in 1956. The founding pastor, Don Householder, was a Methodist. Dr. Elvee was a Baptist. But the church itself had no denominational affiliation or label. The church bulletin and doctrinal statement simply described the church as “interdenominational, evangelical, evangelistic.” The real distinctive of the church was a hunger for biblical preaching, and John MacArthur was the perfect pastor to whet that appetite.

Church growth accelerated almost immediately. And it was not just numerical growth. Grace Church soon developed a nationwide reputation for being a congregation that took the Bible seriously. So many lay people became active in hands-on ministry that, in 1973, *Moody Monthly* published a feature article about Grace Community, titled “The Church with Nine Hundred Ministers.” John MacArthur comes across in the article almost like a minor character.

But John’s preaching is and always has been the mainstay and strength of Grace Church. His great skill as a communicator and his commitment to the hard truths of Scripture are evident from the very first sermon he preached. Already an excellent preacher and a precocious student of Scripture in 1969, John has applied himself with unflagging diligence for the past 42 years. His preaching today reflects a maturity and depth that few in 1969 could have even imagined. Late-twentieth-century American evangelicalism, best known for flashy techniques and market-driven messages, has produced no other expositor whose breadth and depth even comes close to that of John MacArthur. In fact, forty-two years (and counting) of faithful, verse-by-verse exposition of the New Testament puts John MacArthur in the rarefied company of truly great names like John Calvin, Thomas Manton, Stephen Charnock, and D. Martyn Lloyd Jones. What makes John’s unique ministry even more notable is that he has remained at the task—and his influence continues to be felt worldwide—while the vast majority of well-known preachers in the evangelical mainstream have chased popular culture’s fads, becoming more and more trivial and superficial in a mad quest to seem “relevant.”

John’s ministry proves how timeless preaching can be when it is merely sound, clear biblical exposition. As John himself would point out, the power of a great sermon does not belong to or emanate from the preacher. *The Word of God* is living, powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword (Heb 4:12). All truly great preaching starts with that recognition. Preachers who rely solely on their skill, technique, or creativity may sometimes appear “successful” when the only measurement is human applause. But if the aim of preaching is the awakening of spiritually dead souls and the cleansing and transformation of lives spoiled by sin, then all that really counts is that the preacher be faithful in proclaiming the Word of God with clarity, accuracy, and candor. His people must also be doers of the Word and not hearers only.

The founding of The Master's Seminary in 1986 in retrospect seems nothing more than a natural expression of John MacArthur's ministry philosophy in full flower. John had always been devoted to the task of training others for ministry. (That, after all, was what gave Grace Church its reputation as the church with hundreds of ministers.) A seminary on the church campus made it possible to provide in-depth training for full-time ministers in a context where ministry was constantly flourishing, with the emphasis on expository preaching. That, of course, is still the key distinctive of The Master's Seminary today.

In twenty-five brief years, The Master's Seminary has grown into one of the leading seminaries in America. Well-known for its outstanding academic quality, doctrinal soundness, and practical training for Bible-based, church-centered ministry, the seminary is a reflection of the same biblical values that have shaped and ennobled the ministry of its founding president, Dr. John MacArthur.

Congratulations to John and to the seminary faculty on this memorable milestone. I count it a high privilege to have witnessed the growth and early success of The Master's Seminary more or less from a front-row seat. And I hope and anticipate that (until the Lord returns) the Seminary will continue to enjoy the Lord's blessing and the support of His people, remaining faithful to the biblical principles and philosophy of ministry modeled so superbly and consistently for all these years under the leadership of John MacArthur.

