

A Matter of Concern

Doctrinal Orthodoxy and the Writings of

John MacArthur

Critically Reviewed

by

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Part Two

DISPENSATIONALISM

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Now in the USA this may not be seen as a problem since it is the prevailing view of the end. The difficulty is that JMcA espouses a strong Calvinistic position. Most American Christians who see Dispensationalism as equivalent to Evangelical orthodoxy are Arminian and are being consistent. JMcA does not seem to realise that the heart of Dispensationalism is totally opposed to Reformed theology. A Calvinist can be premillennial (though there have historically been few that have been, most are amillennial and some are postmillennial), but one cannot tack a Dispensational eschatology on to a Reformed position. Dispensational eschatology rests upon certain foundations; you cannot have one without the other. These foundations are inimicable to Calvinism. One can only attempt to hold both positions by creating the utmost confusion or by failing to understand either position correctly. JMcA's position is, therefore, hard to pin down. He seeks to follow a Dispensational eschatology while trying to minimise it's erroneous foundations in other aspects of theology. Quite how far he follows the Dispensational system is difficult to determine without reading every note in his study Bible and many of his commentaries.

The following (see page 12 over) are some of the key points of Dispensationalism and the results that flow from it.¹

¹ Dispensationalism itself is difficult to analyse because it has metamorphosed several times. There are at least five formal Dispensational systems in operation: **Classical** (Scofield, Chafer), **Hyper** (Charles Baker), **Ultra** (E. W. Bullinger), **Neo** (Ryrie, Walvoord), and **Progressive** (Saucy, Blaising). JMcA does not seem to sit squarely in any single variant.

- **A literal hermeneutic.**
 - When applied to OT prophecy results in applications which contradict the stated NT fulfilments.
 - It results in absurdities.
 - It emphasises the value of the OT over the NT.
- **History is divided into seven dispensations where man is tested.**
 - Each one ends in failure.
 - Governing factors of one (e.g. law) do not apply in another (e.g. grace).
- **A dichotomy between Israel and the church.**
 - The church is part of a spiritual kingdom only, while Jews will inherit a fleshly, earthly kingdom as seen in the millennium.
 - The kingdom of heaven (earthly, Jewish) and the kingdom of God (spiritual, includes Gentiles) are different.
 - The OT covenant promises are not applicable to the church but only to Jews, who are God's original and true covenant people.
- **A pre-tribulation secret return of Christ and rapture of believers.**
 - Denies the clear NT scriptures regarding Christ's return.
 - Mishandles the Greek terms used and creates a false impression.
 - Dishonours the glory of Christ's second advent.
- **False millennial ideas.**
 - Several resurrections and judgments.
 - The idea that Christ will rule only in the millennium creates a low (and unbiblical) view of His sovereignty now.
 - The idea of the glorified Christ reigning over sinners, in a material sense, is blasphemous. Sin cannot remain in the presence of a perfect, holy God.

One should also point out the origins of this theology. It began about 1830 in a heretical church. There is not one iota of evidence that the tenets of Dispensationalism were present in history before then. The seeds of Dispensationalism were found in Edward Irving's Catholic Apostolic Church,² having been planted by a Spanish Jesuit called Manuel Lacunza. Irving translated his work in 1827. The final missing link (i.e. a secret pre-tribulation coming of Christ to rapture the saints) was provided by a young girl called Margaret MacDonald in 1830. She was one year old in the faith, in a long term illness and susceptible to occult influences through her best friend who was a medium. The idea of a secret rapture came in a prophetic vision during one of her sickly trances. Irving, a friend.

²This church was the original charismatic assembly, practising tongues, directive prophecy and the leadership of apostles etc. It took on a growing erroneous nature and became a scandal before it vanished. Irving himself was discredited for heretical views of the nature of Christ, and died in shame, even ostracised by his own church.

took this up and the idea was promulgated through his church journal, *The Morning Watch*. It was only after this that John Darby picked up the ball and ran with it. His editor, William Kelly, made sure that the discredited Irving was distanced from the origins by emphasising Darby's place in the development of the teaching. As a result, Dispensationalism was first known as *Darbyism*. It was through Darby's frequent visits to the States, and a series of prophetic conferences at the end of the century, that America latched on to the aberration.

There is not the space here to develop this further.³ All I am trying to do is isolate some key doctrinal, but unbiblical, emphases of Dispensationalism.

Now JMcA is strange in all this because he holds to Dispensationalism but mitigates this by upholding certain Calvinistic tenets. For instance, the logical outcome of a Dispensational theology is to fail to see Christ as ruling the world **now**. Many of their teachers state this openly, e.g.,

*The governments of this world are under Satan's authority.*⁴
...[the earth is the] *all pervading domain of Satan over both the social order and it's physical environment.*⁵

They are only being consistent Dispensationalists, yet the Lordship of Christ **now** is a basic presupposition of Calvinism. As such, JMcA holds to this in various messages. How can he be consistent? The Dispensational system breaks down if you hold a Calvinist view of Christ's sovereignty. How can JMcA be both? One cannot have an analogue and a digital method of working in the same system. One system is either digital or analogue.⁶ Many more such inconsistencies appear. These are common in believers, who have not studied what they claim to believe properly and have not followed through with the scriptures carefully. Consequently, their position is hopelessly mixed up and contradictory. But JMcA is a teacher who has enormous influence over others. This luxury is denied him. He must speak a clear and consistent message or he will be guilty of corrupting the saints.

Now it would take far too long to explore the depth of Dispensationalism which ranges in JMcA's study Bible. All the usual Dispensational obscure 'proof' texts (like Zechariah 12-14, Daniel 9 etc.) are swamped with Dispensational notes and valid Reformed comment which overturns these presuppositions is completely ignored. But worse, texts which are not obscure and do not in any way admit of a Dispensational exposition are still subjected to it. This is a very injudicious way of

³ If required I have a 55 page paper on the subject.

⁴ L.S. Chafer, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, third qtr. 1985.

⁵ Clough, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, third qtr. 1988.

⁶ Some wristwatches contain both, but this is an example of two systems close together, not one.

handling God's word. A couple of extracts will suffice:

- In the page dealing with 2 Thess. 2:1-6 we have clear statements regarding the end (apart from the restraining influence, no one knows what meant by this). No mention of a millennium, secret rapture or other key Dispensational ideas. The text covers only one fifth of the page, the notes cover four fifths. This is already a wrong balance for this text. [In comparison, the crucifixion in Jn. 19, the page is split 50/50. Page 1700 dealing with justification by faith in Rm. 4 and 5 is also fairly evenly split. This shows JMcA's extremely unwise pre-occupation with propaganda for his variety of eschatology. But what is worse, in his notes on 2 Thess. 2 we find the following comments:
 - *They had expected the Rapture ...to take place before the Day of the Lord.*
 - *They had expected to be taken to glory ... not left to persecution and divine wrath. Paul must have taught them that they would miss the Day of the Lord. (Which comes after a secret return of Christ to take believers off the earth. The cross reference to 1 Thess. 5:2 tells us that this occurs at the end of the 7 year tribulation or at the end of the millennium.)*
 - *There are detailed references to antichrist quoting support from Dan. 7:8 and 9:26. 'The falling away' is the abomination of desolation that takes place at the mid point of the Tribulation spoken of in Dan. 9:27; 11:31 and Matt. 24:15. It continues further with detailed explanations of the tribulation, the relations with Israel, the two 3 year periods etc.*

How can a serious expositor read all these things into this passage, or in 1 Thess. 5:2 for that matter? There is no mention of the words, *millennium, rapture, tribulation, 7 years, 3 years, abomination of desolation, Israel* and so on. Both texts clearly show that the gathering of the saints is at the Day of the Lord, but JMcA separates these events, by at least seven years or even 1007 years. Having made this arbitrary and unbiblical separation, he can then offer many other ideas which fit into this gap but not into the texts.

JMcA has let his presuppositions and his system completely overturn simple exegesis. It is not just a bad interpretation of the passage, it is eisegesis, reading into scripture something that is not there. This is very dangerous because this is not a commentary, but a study Bible which people will use frequently. Here John overwhelms text with comment, and offers comment which is not based on the text but upon his presuppositions. This is dangerous.

- Another example is the prophecy of Daniel in chapter 9. Now this is a difficult passage and a key foundation for Dispensational beliefs. Clear exegesis is heavily dependent upon accurately translating the various key words. Obviously,

one understands that a Dispensationalist will emphasise his interpretation, but a judicious expositor will also explain that there are other views and outline them. The best exposition I have seen is that of E. J. Young. His exegesis is careful, scholarly, well read and sane. He interprets the seventy sevens prophecy as referring to the triumph of Christ and fully takes into account Dispensational arguments, exposing their weaknesses. JMcA is not so judicious. He does not refer to alternate positions, he applies it all to the future: *the future of Israel in the final end of the age*. The six statements of purpose ('make an end of sins', 'make reconciliation' etc.) are taken from Christ and applied to Israel; culminating in the astonishing statement that, '*a temple of the future that will be the center (sic) of worship in the millennium kingdom*'. In the notes on vv.24-26 JMcA seems to rely on his researchers which contradict his statements in the notes on v.27. In the former, the final 7 years relate to the destruction of Jerusalem; later JMcA relates them to the tribulation '*the future 7 year period ... this time is in the future tribulation*'. He gives no explanation why there is a 2000 year gap so far between week 69 and week 70 in a prophecy which necessitates being read as a unit. He has the antichrist make a new covenant with Israel, when the text states that it is not the making of a covenant but the confirmation of an existing one. We could go on. One could forgive a Dispensationalist emphasis, if he cannot be persuaded otherwise by sound argument, but a study Bible must be fair and even handed, showing that there are alternatives; especially if those alternatives make more sense! This is a serious criticism of this work.

Interim Conclusion

It is perfectly acceptable for Dispensationalists to produce study Bibles. The real problem with JMcA's is his reputation as a conservative, historic Calvinist. JMcA is not. In the UK the situation is worse. The main distributor for JMcA's Study Bible are my friends at the *Martyn Lloyd-Jones Recordings Trust*. Although JMcA's organisation '*Grace To You*' is separate, it is run in tandem with the Doctor's ministry. His newsletters go out in the same mailing. Many learned of JMcA's ministry via initially wanting to purchase MLJ's tapes. For many, JMcA is seen as a successor to the learned Doctor.

Now MLJ was amillennial. It will be a shock for people receiving JMcA's material, as a follow on to receiving MLJ tapes, to find that JMcA is Dispensational. Even if JMcA was simply premillennial it would be a shock, but to discover that JMcA is as nearly as extreme a dispensationalist as Ryrie or Chafer is more than a shock, it's an earthquake. Sadly, many who are unclear on eschatology, or easily swayed in theology, are likely to be confused, or even swayed, by having Dispensational notes present in a Bible they read every day. This is how Dispensationalism spread so rapidly, despite being a modern novelty and full of

contradictions. It was the Scofield Bible which led to the rapid spread of the error, selling over three million copies by 1960. I am deeply concerned that the MacArthur Study Bible will have the same deleterious effect, but upon the Calvinist population.

Part 3: A Critical Analysis of McArthur's Christology will appear (DV) in the next Issue of the British Reformed Journal. Jan-March 1999

Some recommended Reading on Dispensationalism

Readers who wish to expand their background knowledge concerning the idiosyncratic origins and development of Dispensational doctrine would do well to consult the following works:

1. Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth by John H. Gerstner Ph.D.

ISBN 1-56121-021-8 Publ. Wolgemuth & Hyatt Inc. USA 1991. Nearly 300 pages of devastating criticism and exposure of Dispensationalism.

2. The Incredible Cover-Up by Dave MacPherson.

ISBN 0-931608-06-6 Publ. Omega, of Medford, Oregon 1980. A journalist's researches and exposures of the Origins of the Secret Rapture idea. Draws attention to documentation of "unreliability and untruthfulness" in J.N. Darby's narratives as exposed by later Brethren writers.

3. The Incredible Scofield by Joseph M. Canfield.

ISBN N/A Publ. Ross House Books of Vallecito California, 1988. Some 300 astonishing pages that "take the lid off" Scofield and his Bible. This book is dynamite, so much so that the author could hardly find a publisher to handle it. Recommended by no less than Loraine Boettner, who evidently read the work some years prior to publication.

4. The Thirteenth Tribe by Arthur Koestler.

ISBN 0 330 25069 8 Publ. Pan Books (Picador Imprint) London 1983 (4th printing). Koestler was a Jew, and was naturally interested in the history and heritage of his people. How his fascinating discoveries could possibly fit in to the Dispensational Scheme looks impossible. The book has been described as "stimulating" by George Steiner in the *Sunday Times*, as "intriguing.....asks to be read" by the *Financial Times*, and as "explosive" by the *Birmingham Post*. In the *Observer* it was described by Philip Toynbee as "fascinatingly controversial".

5. The Church is Israel Now by Charles D. Provan

ISBN N/A Publ. Ross House Books, Vallecito, California 1987. Seventy-four absolutely devastating pages. Consists almost completely of Scriptures collated under a series of headings that indicate how the prophecies and promises pertaining to Israel now wholly apply to the Church.