

“John MacArthur on Calvinism, Dispensationalism, Israel, and Hermeneutics: A Few Comments”

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In April 2007, I made my way through Dr. MacArthur’s controversial lecture, “Why Every Self-Respecting Calvinist Is a Premillennialist” (given at the Shepherd’s Conference at Grace Community Church, on March 7, 2007).

As we have come to expect of him, Dr. MacArthur spoke with great passion, covered much ground quickly, and had a great deal to say. No question, Dr. MacArthur commands authority. One can easily see why Dr. MacArthur is so widely-respected. When it comes to the gospel, he’s on the side of the angels. When it comes to eschatology, however, I must beg to differ.

As a Reformed amillennarian (who was raised a dispensationalist) I had a powerful gut-level reaction to Dr. MacArthur’s lecture. While this lecture was well-received by the friendly and largely dispensational home court audience to whom it was delivered, surely Dr. MacArthur knew that his words would amount to picking a fight with those Reformed amillennarians who were present. This was not the playful jab that conference speakers often take at one another at such events. No, this was a warning of sorts—a shot fired across the bow.

My take is that this was MacArthur’s attempt to go from being on defense to switching over to offense. Despite the self-assurance with which the lecture was delivered, in many ways, the lecture seemed like a rather desperate attempt to stem the rising tide of interest in Reformed amillennialism in the Reformed-evangelical conference circuit, where many are now openly rejecting MacArthur’s beloved dispensationalism. At least that’s how it seemed to me.

As I worked my way through the specific points raised by Dr. MacArthur, it was very hard not to become exasperated. The lecture seemed out of place at such a conference and would have been a much better fit at a conference devoted to dispensational eschatology. At least the audience would have known what was coming in advance.

More to the point, “Why Every Self-Respecting Calvinist Is a Premillennialist” was a rather strident attack upon something that I as a Reformed amillennarian don’t believe. In fact, it was hard to recognize my own position as Dr. MacArthur made his case. Sadly, this was clearly an attack upon something that Dr. MacArthur truly believes that Reformed amillennarians believe. The same circumstance was true, no doubt, for those historic premillennarians, who likewise embrace Calvinism and arrived at the “Shepherd’s Conference” only to be told that in order to be consistent to Scripture and God’s sovereignty, they too must embrace MacArthur’s dispensationalism in addition to being premillennial.

That Dr. MacArthur is a premillennial dispensationalist comes as no surprise. He has every right to state and defend his position, especially before his home church. But I am sure that many in the audience gathered for the Shepherd’s Conference were taken aback by the fact that he picked this particular forum--especially when a number of Reformed amillennarians were present and

when several well-known amillenarians were invited to speak at the conference—to make the point that unless you adopt the dispensational hermeneutic you are unable to understand much of the Bible (certainly the eschatological portions).

With a rather striking measure of audacity, Dr. MacArthur went on to argue that unless you are a dispensationalist, you cannot be a “consistent Calvinist.” Under such circumstances, it is no wonder that as soon as live-blogger Tim Challies posted his initial report about MacArthur’s lecture, emails began to fly and the blogosphere went nuts! “Did you hear what MacArthur said about Calvinism?” “Did you hear what MacArthur said about amillennialism?” “Did you hear what he said about Calvin?” Thankfully, things have now calmed down a bit and we can look at these matters more objectively.

As I see it, here’s the issue. Dr. MacArthur picked this fight. His contention that unless you see Scripture through dispensational eyes, you cannot be a “self-respecting Calvinist” surprised many—Reformed amillennarians and historic premillennarians alike. Without the dispensational lens—says MacArthur—you will misunderstand much of the Bible. The latter point is part of the long-standing debate between amillennarians and dispensationalists (and no surprise), but the former comes as big news to those of us who are confessional Reformed Christians who think MacArthur’s brand of dispensational premillennialism is antithetical to any historic or confessional form of Reformed or Calvinistic theology.

Yet, here is John MacArthur telling confessional Calvinists that unless they give up their amillennialism, they cannot be consistently “Calvinists.” The sheer audacity of that charge is striking.

Given the length of his address and number of issues raised (and since many—including me—have written extensively on the subject of eschatology elsewhere), rather than reply to every point, a few representative examples must suffice. What follows then, is my response to some of the key points Dr. MacArthur raises in his lecture.

I. Dr. MacArthur on Premillennialism and Calvinism:

“Now that leads to my title: ‘Why Every Self-Respecting Calvinist Is a Premillennialist’ [laughter and applause] Now it’s too late for Calvin, but it’s not too late for the rest of you. And if Calvin were here he would join our movement. [laughter]”

“But bottom line here, of all people on the planet to be pre-millennialist it should be Calvinists; those who love sovereign election. Let’s leave amillennialism for the Arminians. It’s perfect! [laughter] It’s ideal. It’s a no-brainer. God elects nobody and preserves nobody. Perfect! Arminians make great amillennialists. It’s consistent. But not for those who live and breathe the rarified air of sovereign electing grace. That makes no sense. We can leave amillennialism to the process theologians . . . or the ‘openness’ people who think God is becoming what he will be, and he’s getting better because as every day goes by he gets more information. And as he gets more information he’s figuring out whether or not in fact he can keep some of the promises he made without

having to adjust all of them based upon lack of information when he originally made them. Let's leave amillennialism to the charismatics in the semi-Pelagians and other sorts of go in and out of salvation willy-nilly; makes sense for their theology . . .”

Upon hearing the lecture, it is apparent that Dr. MacArthur is being facetious when he claims Calvin for the dispensationalists. That's a good thing because Calvin was very clear where he stood on chiliasm (millennialism). “This fiction is too puerile to need or to deserve refutation. Nor do they receive any countenance from the Apocalypse, from which it is known that they extracted a gloss for their error, (Revelation 20:4,) since the thousand years there mentioned refer not to the eternal blessedness of the Church, but only to the various troubles which await the Church militant in this world” (Institutes 3.25.5).

As Richard Muller pointed out back in 1993, there is every likelihood that John MacArthur's "Calvinism" would probably not be recognized by Calvin himself (See Richard Muller's response to attempts like MacArthur's to co-opt the term "Reformed," Click here: Riddleblog - "How Many Points?").

Regrettably, Dr. MacArthur is not above using the fallacy of generalization to argue that amillennialism (based upon his faulty understanding of the amillennial position on Israel—more on this below) is more consistent with Arminianism, process theology, and the semi-Pelagianism of much of the Charismatic movement. This is simply a cheap shot. Dr. MacArthur surely knows that it is confessional Calvinists (most of whom are amillennial) who have been the most outspoken critics of the open theism and the semi-Pelagianism and Arminianism now making its way deeper into the evangelical blood stream.

It is rather ironic that the authors of the Canons of the Synod of Dort—who gave us the so-called five points of Calvinism in opposition to the first Arminians—were, with one exception, all non-premillennarians. There is no reason whatsoever to think that their amillennial eschatology ever played any role in the development of Arminianism. What's more, the Arminians themselves never argued that this was the case. Frankly, this is an outlandish and ill-informed statement.

II. John MacArthur on Israel and Hermeneutics:

“The irony is that those who most celebrate the sovereign grace of election regarding the church, and its inviolable place in God's purpose from predestination to glorification, and those who most aggressively and militantly defend the truth of promise and fulfillment, those who are the advocates of election being divine, unilateral, unconditional, and irrevocable by nature for the church, unashamedly deny the same for elect Israel. That is a strange division. As it does, the perpetuity of the elect church to salvation glory, so the Scripture in similar language and by promises from the same God, affirms the perpetuity of ethnic Israel to a future salvation of a generation of Jews that will fulfill all divine promises given to them by God. In both cases this is the work of, and the result of, divine

sovereign election. . .”

“Now all that leads us to this: if you get Israel right you will get eschatology right. If you don't get Israel right you will never get eschatology right. Never. And you'll migrate from one view to another just depending on the last book you read or the last lecture you heard If you get eschatology right it's because you get Israel right. You get Israel right when you get the Old Testament covenants and promises right. You get the Old Testament covenants and promises right when you get the interpretation of Scripture right. You get interpretation of Scripture right when you're faithful to a legitimate hermeneutic and God's integrity is upheld. Get your hermeneutics right, you'll get the Old Testament promises right. Get promises right, you'll get Israel right. Get Israel right, you'll get eschatology right. The Bible calls God the God of Israel over 200 times. The God of Israel. There are over 2,000 references to Israel in Scripture, not one of them means anything but Israel. Not one of them, including Romans 9:6 and Galatians 6:16 which is the only two passages that amillennialists go to trying to convince us that that cancels out the other 2,000. There is no difficulty in interpreting those as simply meaning Jews who were believers; the Israel of God. Israel always means Israel, never means anything but Israel. Seventy three New Testament uses of Israel always mean Israel.”

While I'll respond to MacArthur's argument about the number of times the Bible speaks of Israel a bit later, at this point let me just say that Dr. MacArthur is absolutely correct about one thing; Get your hermeneutics right and you will get your eschatology right. But here's precisely where we part ways with Dr. MacArthur and his dispensational presupposition that because national Israel lies at the heart of all biblical eschatology and covenants, the Old Testament promises made to national Israel are the hermeneutical center of Scripture. As an amillennarian, I assign that place to Jesus Christ, who, the New Testament tells me, is the true Israel.

Understanding the difference between the amillennial hermeneutic and the dispensational hermeneutic is the key to understanding the essence of this debate. Every major dispensational theologian from Walvoord to Pentecost to Ryrie to MacArthur himself, insists that God has two distinct redemptive programs—one for national Israel and one for the Gentiles. MacArthur clearly affirms this dispensational presupposition in the quote above.

Reformed amillennarians reject this understanding of God's redemptive purposes. God's purpose is not to save two distinct peoples (divided by ethnicity), but to save his people (the elect), a multitude which no man can number (Revelation 7:9), and which includes each and every one of those whom God has chosen, whether they be Jew or Gentile.

In Ephesians 2:11-22, Paul addresses this very point when discussing God's redemptive purpose for Gentiles and national Israel. Here, Paul flat-out contradicts the dispensational assertion that God has distinct redemptive purposes for national Israel and for the church. According Paul, God's purpose in the New Covenant is to remove the ethnic distinctions between Jew and Gentile (between Israel and the church) which had been dividing them. Paul says that Jesus came

to tear down the barrier wall which formerly divided the two, in order to make the two peoples into one so as to form Jew and Gentile together into the one living temple of the Lord—the church. In this spiritual temple, Christ is the chief cornerstone, and the foundation is the prophets and apostles.

While dispensationalists will concede that this is God's purpose for the present age, they say Israel's distinct role resurfaces again after the Rapture when the Gentile church is removed from the earth. This dual redemptive purpose then carries on throughout the millennial age after Christ comes back. If true, this means that it is Christ's purpose to make the two peoples one is only temporary. God intends to divide Israel (ethnic Jews) again from the Gentiles after the resurrection (1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11).

Of course, this makes no sense whatsoever. In fact, such a view forces us to see the future millennial age as something completely distinct from Christ's redemptive purpose under the New Covenant. On these terms, the as-yet future millennium marks a return to Old Testament types and shadows and ignores the fact that the reality is Christ. This not only means that redemptive history takes a giant U-turn after Christ comes back, amounting to a return to the types and shadows which preceded the coming of the Messiah, but it completely ignores the very thing Christ came to do—make the two peoples one by removing all ethnic divisions which previously divided believers! The progress of redemption takes us from promise (types and shadows) to fulfillment (anti-types), not from promise, to temporary (or transitional) fulfillment, and then finally back to the types and shadows.

This is why a Christ-centered hermeneutic changes everything and why this hermeneutic lies at the heart of the differences between Reformed amillennialism and dispensationalism. As Bob Strimple (the former president of Westminster Seminary California, and now professor emeritus of systematic theology) points out in a lecture he often gives on this very topic, there are a number of reasons why Israel's role in the Old Testament was preparatory to the coming Christ, and can therefore cannot serve as the hermeneutical center of Scripture. The fact is that Christ comes to fulfill (literally) all of the Old Testament promises, not to temporarily put them aside, only to return to them in a future millennium. Strimple bases his view that Christ is the true Israel on the following biblical arguments:

- 1). Isaiah's servant songs have a double referent that has long baffled Jewish commentators. On the one hand, they refer to Israel, God's chosen one and servant (41:8-9; 44:1-2, 21; 45:4; 49:3). On the other, they seem also to refer to some individual (42:1-4). These prophecies are interpreted by the New Testament as referring to Christ (Matthew 8:17 and Acts 8:30-35)
- 2). Matthew sees a double referent in Hosea 11:1, ("Out of Egypt I called my son")
- 3). Paul identifies Christ, not physical Israel, as Abraham's seed (Galatians 3:16). Galatians 3:7 and Romans 4:11, 16, moreover, identify the church as Abraham's offspring.
- 4). Henceforth, we are in Christ the true Israel: Galatians 3:26-29, Romans 2:28-29, and Philippians 3:3.

5). The Old Covenant is obsolete, having been superseded by the New: Hebrews 8:8-12 identifies the new covenant with Israel (Jeremiah 31:33-34) with the covenant instituted by Christ with the church. Most importantly, Hebrews 8:13 declares the old covenant obsolete and passing away. This makes impossible the dispensational view of Ezekiel 40-48 as a reinstatement of temple sacrifice.

6). The upshot is that the Old Testament did not see how its own prophecies were to be fulfilled - indeed, it could not prior to Christ. The New Testament authors were able to interpret the Old Testament in the light of His coming of the new covenant that He instituted. So should we.

As Strimple points out, this means that Jesus is the true Israel, and that all Scripture—especially its prophetic sections—must be read through a Christ-centered hermeneutic, not a dispensational one which centers upon national Israel.

In his lecture, MacArthur makes the point that since God elects Israel, and since “Israel means Israel,” any other approach to eschatology destroys the perspicuity of the Old Testament. Yes, Dr. MacArthur is right that Israel always means Israel, but that’s not the point.

When the writers of the New Testament see Israel in the light of the coming of Jesus Christ, they now see that the nation of Israel and the Sinaitic covenant which established it, were intended by God to point ahead to the coming of Jesus. That’s what Paul is getting at in Galatians 3:19-25, when he speaks of the law as intended by God to prepare the way for the coming of Christ. This is because the law exposes our sin and like a school-master drives us to Christ.

But this truth was largely hidden in the types and shadows of the Old Testament era in redemptive history because Christ had not yet come and the ultimate purpose of the law could not yet be seen. But this same truth is impossible to escape after Jesus steps out of type and shadow onto the center stage of redemption (Galatians 4:4-5). It Jesus who now tells us the true purpose of the Old Covenant—“You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me” (John 5:39). This is not amillennial "spiritualizing" of Scripture, it is the method of biblical interpretation taught us by Jesus and his apostles!

III. Is the Old Testament Amillennial?

“Is the Old Testament amillennial? Now a note here please: it is not legitimate to interpret the Old Testament as secondary to the New Testament as primary. Okay? That's not legitimate. Otherwise, the Old Testament was literally darkness not light. If you say that the Old Testament cannot be rightly interpreted apart from the New Testament then you have denied the perspicuity of the Old Testament.”

MacArthur’s rhetorical question (“is the Old Testament amillennial?”) and his subsequent qualification (it is not legitimate to treat the Old Testament as “secondary”), is another critical

point of contention and gets right to the heart of the debate.

Here is the basic hermeneutical question: “Does the Old Testament tell us what the New Testament means (even though Christ has not yet come during the time of Old Testament revelation), or does the New Testament interpret the Old Testament?” MacArthur argues for the former, while Reformed amillennarians the latter.

Reformed amillennarians have never argued that the Old Testament is “amillennial” per se. Let’s be clear about that. We have argued that the promise of a land given to Israel is itself typological of a heavenly kingdom which was inconceivable in the days of the patriarchs and Moses. But we only know this because the author of Hebrews tells us as much. In other words, the New Testament tells us what the things promised in the Old Testament truly mean.

The true glories of what God promised cannot be seen until the coming of Christ—although when the New Testament looks back in this, we learn that Abraham “got it” because although he was promised a land in Palestine (Genesis 12:1-3), by faith he knew that the reality for the people of God (Jew or Gentile) was not found in any earthly promise, including the promised land. “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God” (Hebrews 11:8-10).

The point is that we could never possibly understand the promise in its fullness if we regarded the original promise in Genesis 12:1-3 as the hermeneutical key to determine how we understand such things even in the light of future (and greater) revelatory light.

Dispensationalists have this completely backwards. They say the Old Testament tells us what the promise is—a land in Palestine. Therefore, we must take this literally (even if the New Testament tells us otherwise) or else we undermine the authority of Scripture.

We say the New Testament clarifies and amplifies the Old Testament promises in light of Christ. It is not the amillennarian, but the apostle Paul who “spiritualizes” the land promise by extending the land promised to Abraham to the whole world after the coming of Christ (Romans 4:13). It is not the amillennarian, but the author of Hebrews who tells us that the promise of a land in Palestine was typological of the heavenly city which Abraham desired because he saw that the land pointed him to something even greater. Now that Christ has come, we can see why redemptive history unfolds in the manner that it does. Promise gives way to fulfillment. Types and shadows give way to biblical reality. And while we are speaking of the Old Testament, didn’t Joshua himself tell us that the typological promise of the land had already been fulfilled (Joshua 21:43), leading us to expect the New Testament to universalize the land promise in light of the coming of Christ?

At this point, the critical question raised by Dr. MacArthur’s comment above is “just why did national Israel reject Jesus’ messianic kingship and thereby come under the covenant curse?”

Jesus was rejected because the kingdom he came to bring Israel was not an earthly kingdom (John 18:36; and in Romans 14:17 Paul tells us that “the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit”). Israel rejected Jesus because they were seeking a national/political kingdom tied to the land promised to Abraham and to the typological kingship of David. They were not looking for that spiritual kingdom defined in the parables of Matthew 13 which spreads into the whole world (cf. Matthew 13:32). No, they wanted to be a great nation with a king as they had been in the past, and this meant a defeat of Rome.

In other words, the Jews wanted a geo-political kingdom much like that described by the dispensationalists as characteristic of the future millennial age. Blinded by a zeal without knowledge (Romans 10:2), a trust in personal righteousness instead of that provided by God through faith (cf. Philippians 3:3-11) and because of the national embarrassment and harsh realities of Roman occupation, when Jesus didn't offer or promise the Jews such a kingdom, they rejected him.

In this we see why the Reformed Confessions condemned the proto-dispensationalism of the Reformation era in the harshest of terms. “We further condemn Jewish dreams that there will be a golden age on earth before the Day of Judgment, and that the pious, having subdued all their godless enemies, will possess all the kingdoms of the earth. For evangelical truth in Matt., chs. 24 and 25, and Luke, ch. 18, and apostolic teaching in 2 Thess., ch. 2, and 2 Tim., chs. 3 and 4, present something quite different” (Second Helvetic Confession 11.10).

This condemnation is not a racial and therefore an anti-Semitic issue—“these people are wrong because they are Jews.” Rather it is a hermeneutical matter. Christians have two testaments, not just the Old Covenant. Those who hold to “Jewish dreams” are condemned for the error of allowing the typological kingdom found in the Old Testament to serve as the hermeneutical fulcrum of the New Testament. Such people cannot make sense of Scripture because they do not see Christ as the sum and substance of all biblical Revelation.

The whole point of the biblical proof texts cited in the confession, along with the parables in Matthew 13 just considered, is that the gospel is preached throughout this age until the harvest, which is the second coming of Christ (Matthew 13:49-50). The kingdom is clearly consummated at that time, but not before. But it is also clear that the kingdom is not postponed until the millennium, after Jesus returns. Until that day, the kingdom remains a present reality tied to word and sacrament, and is the very foundation for the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20).

It is just plain wrong to assert that Reformed amillennarians somehow believe that the New Testament is “primary” and the Old Testament is “secondary.” We believe that both are equally the word of God. But from the examples we have already seen, it is clear that the Old Testament is the story of Christ hidden in type, shadow and promise. The reason we know this is because the New Testament repeatedly tells us that's the case—that's the whole point of fulfilled prophecy and passages like Ephesians 2:11-12 and Hebrews 11:8-10 cited above!

The Old Testament repeatedly promises a redeemer and exhorts Israel to look for him (e.g.

Deuteronomy 18:18; 2 Samuel 7:11-16), while the New Testament shows us who that redeemer is and how he fulfills these Old Testament expectations. The pattern we see in the two testaments of Scripture is the movement from promise (Old Testament) to fulfillment (New Testament), from shadow and type to reality. This is the hermeneutic given us in Scripture itself. Yet, this is the very thing dispensationalists like Dr. MacArthur tell us to ignore.

While Dr. MacArthur believes the Old Testament remains darkness if we don't see Israel as the hermeneutical crux, we believe that is only through the light of Christ that the Old Testament truly comes into proper focus.

Furthermore, to describe the matter in terms of "primary" and "secondary" as though Reformed amillennarians depreciate the Old Testament and downplay the role of Israel in the New Testament (and therefore in our eschatology) is grossly inaccurate. I am unashamedly a Christian and not a Jew. Jesus and the apostles tell me what the Old Testament said (in type and shadow) about the coming of Christ and his kingdom. To view the Old Testament in this way does not in the slightest deny the perspicuity of the Old Testament. Rather we affirm that the essence of the Old Testament is the revelation of Jesus Christ hidden in type and shadow. How do we know that, you might ask? Well, no less than Jesus himself taught us that in Luke 24:27 when Jesus gave a Bible study to two of his disciples walking along the road to Emmaus. "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself." It was Jesus who said that the Old Testament bore witness to him. It was Jesus who taught us to read the Old Testament in light of his coming.

Therefore, the Christ-centered hermeneutic of Reformed amillennialism—in which the New Testament interprets the Old (type, shadow and promise pointing to Christ)—was that view taught by none other than Jesus himself. This is why a Christ-centered hermeneutic is so important and why the debate with dispensationalists is so critical. One of us is badly mistaken and misreading much of Scripture—and I sure don't think it is the Reformed amillennarian.

As I mentioned earlier, one issue raised by Dr. MacArthur as an argument in his favor, actually proves my point. At first glance, it's rather impressive that the Bible mentions Israel some 2000 times and each time the word appears, "Israel always means Israel." But when you think about it, MacArthur's argument very quickly unravels and this actually becomes a strong argument for the amillennial interpretation of redemptive history.

By MacArthur's own admission, Israel is mentioned some 1927 times in the Old Testament, and only 73 times in the New Testament. That's precisely what you would expect if Jesus Christ fulfills the promises made by God to Israel because he is the true Israel! The focus upon national Israel very naturally gives way to a focus upon Christ and his church, which is exactly what happens in the New Testament.

Most of these New Testament references to Israel occur in the gospels when Jesus is confronting the Pharisees and others who are in the process of rejecting Jesus' messianic kingship. Luke mentions Israel a number of times in Acts, almost always in reference to Jewish opposition to the preaching of Christ. Israel is rarely mentioned in the epistles—most often in Romans 9-11, which

is the only place in the New Testament where Paul specifically speaks of the future of Israel in redemptive history.

In Romans 9-11, Paul describes in rather big-picture terms the role of Israel in redemptive history, now that Christ has come. The presence of a believing remnant enables Paul to argue that God is not yet finished with Israel. In fact, Paul speaks of a time when all Israel will be saved (11:25-26). But when all Israel is saved, it is vital to notice that this occurs only because Israel is grafted back into the righteous root, who is Christ. There is not a word here about a millennial kingdom, two distinct redemptive plans for Jew and Gentile, Israel returning to the land promised to Abraham, nor a seven-year tribulation. In fact, none of the key dispensational distinctives are mentioned in the very text where you think they would be mentioned, if these things were part of New Testament eschatology. God will once again show mercy on Israel so they come to Christ in faith. Therefore, whatever the salvation of all Israel entails in Romans 9-11, Paul is referring to Jews becoming Christians! Not a hint here of dispensational notions of two redemptive purposes, even though Jews and Gentiles are treated as distinct ethnic groups.

IV. Israel and “Replacement Theology”

“Honestly, I rarely hear somebody preach on the Old Testament and interpret the Old Testament the way a person a living at the time it was written would have interpreted it. We can use it as an illustration. We can use it to elucidate it. We can use it as an example. These things are written, right, as examples Paul told the Corinthians. But it has to have its own meaning to its own people; it must have clarity and perspicuity. And if you say all those promises to Israel really were to the Church they were meaningless and unintelligible to them.”

“Replacement theology this is called, by the way, and scholastically often referred to as supersessionism. It demands that the Old Testament promises be viewed through the lens of the New Testament. It also strikes a strange dichotomy since all the curses promised Israel came to Israel , right? — literally — and they're still coming. If you wonder whether the curses and the Old Testament were literal, they're going on right now. Israel right now is not under divine protection. They are under the promise of God that they will be perpetuated as an ethnic people, but this current, this current group of Jews that live in the world today and in the nation Israel are not now under divine protection. They're apostate. They've rejected their Messiah. They are under divine chastening. But they are still a people and will be to the end. What a staggering apologetic that is for the truthfulness of scripture. You can't abandon that without a huge loss of confidence in Scripture.”

So . . . in light of our prior discussion, why is it such a gross error to insist that all the Old Testament promises be seen through the lens of the New Testament? Isn't that what the New Testament tells us to do? And how does seeing God keep and fulfill every one of his promises in Christ made to national Israel, bring about a huge loss of confidence in the authority of

Scripture?

To make these points stick and give them some rhetorical flourish, at this point MacArthur resorts to pulling the dispensational “trump card.” This is to accuse the Reformed of embracing “replacement theology,” wherein the church supposedly replaces national Israel in the purposes of God. According to dispensationalists, this opens the door to the two great amillennial evils--a non-literal interpretation of the Bible and anti-Semitism.

As far as anti-Semitism goes, let me just say that racism in any form is a sin and must be repented of. Let me also say that the Reformed (especially the Dutch Reformed) have a rather illustrious history when it comes to rescuing Jews from the clutches of the Nazis during WWII. I know of at least three families in Dutch Reformed Churches now living in Southern California who risked everything to rescue numerous Jews from certain death. Such people (although there are sadly fewer of them, given our chronological distance from the war) are common in these circles. So, on a practical level, the charge that Reformed Christianity leads to anti-Semitism seems laughable. But this is, after all, merely anecdotal and not a biblical argument.

Please, Dr. MacArthur, tell me how it is that preaching Christ to Jews and showing them from their own Scriptures that Christ was the promised one, is anti-Semitic and undercuts biblical authority? Please tell me how preaching that Jesus Christ fulfills all the promises made to God's people somehow weakens biblical authority and our witness to Jews? Is Christ not the light of the world, and the one in whom is found all the riches and treasures of heaven? How does preaching that God keeps his promises in Christ, undermine Jewish evangelism?

In fact, is this not what precisely Peter did on Pentecost Sunday when he showed the Jews how the Davidic kingship in the Old Testament (2 Samuel 7) pointed ahead to Christ's Ascension to God's right hand? So much for Jesus returning to the types of the Old Testament and sitting on a throne in Jerusalem in an earthly millennium--Peter sees the events of Pentecost as the fulfillment of a number of Old Testament promises. There is no hint here of a return to types and shadows in a future millennium. It seems to me that this is Peter's answer to the question the disciples themselves asked Jesus in Acts 1:8 about a hoped-for future restoration of the kingdom to Israel. Once the Holy Spirit had been poured out upon all flesh at Pentecost, Christ's kingship can now be seen for what it is--not bound to one land or nation and which spreads to the very ends of the earth through the preaching of the gospel. Before Pentecost, the disciples could not possibly understand what a true restoration of Israel's kingdom would entail. Now they see that their expectations of a national kingdom grossly underestimated what God had actually promised. Christ's kingship and his ascension to God's right hand, is what God promised to Israel. Jesus now rules and reigns over all, since his is the name which is above every other name.

As for the accusation that we Reformed amillennarians hold to "replacement theology," I don't know of a single Reformed amillennarian who identifies themselves as a "replacement" theologian. Now, that doesn't mean that there aren't any, but it does indicate that this is a label slapped on us by those who disagree with our eschatology. But this is not (and never has been) how we identify ourselves.

Given all the "replacement theology" charges made by popular dispensational writers like John Hagee, it is sad that this same charge now comes from Dr. MacArthur. Let me put it simply so as not to be misunderstood. Reformed amillennarians do not believe that the church "replaces" Israel. Repeat, we do not believe that the church replaces Israel.

Rather, we do believe that there is one people of God, the elect. In the Old Testament most of the elect are members of the covenant line, culminating the formation of national Israel at Mt. Sinai—although there is some evidence of true believers outside the covenant people (Melchizedek and those who truly repented in Ninevah come to mind). Likewise, there is much biblical evidence that unbelievers are present within the national covenant, hence the distinction made between the visible and invisible church.

As I have argued in this response and elsewhere, the national/temporal promises of a land, a temple, a priesthood, the sacrifices and so on, made to Israel under the old covenant actually point to something far greater (heavenly promises) and which are fulfilled in Christ. Thus under the New Covenant believers are now called out from among all nations (including Israel) to belong to Christ's church, which is the visible manifestation of the New Covenant people of God.

Therefore, Israel is not “replaced” by the church. Rather, the people of God (believing Jews and Gentiles) in the Old Covenant era are vastly supplemented by believers from every nation tribe and tongue in the New Covenant. This is not “replacement theology.” It should be called “expansion theology” since the people of God become so numerous after the coming of Christ that the multitude in heaven cannot be counted (Revelation 7:9-10). In fact, that multitude encompasses people from the ends of the earth, including many ethnic Jews who are among the elect and believe in Jesus, because Jesus Christ has been revealed to them by a gracious God.

V. Conclusion:

Along with countless others, I am very grateful for John MacArthur's bold and vocal defense of the Gospel. I am also grateful for his years of faithful service and willingness to tackle controversy in the evangelical church. But how I wish that Dr. MacArthur had chosen not to pick this fight. Sadly, he did.

This is hard to say, but in his lecture Dr. MacArthur set up and repeatedly attacked a straw man. His was a pyrrhic victory over a phantom foe.

If you are a dispensationalist, my plea is that you don't repeat the arguments Dr. MacArthur used in this lecture. Disagree as you will, you do have the responsibility to accurately represent the Reformed amillennial position. Dr. MacArthur did not.

My suggestion is to read the books listed here ([Click here: Riddleblog - The Latest Post - A Quick List of Amillennial Resources in Light of MacArthur's Charges](#)), and then after doing so, make up your own mind. Interact with amillennial writers, weigh our arguments in light of Scripture, and see if we are truly guilty of the charges leveled at us by Dr. MacArthur.

While you may not be convinced of Reformed amillennialism (hopefully, you will!), at least you'll be better informed and realize that Reformed amillennarians are not anti-Semites who don't take the Bible literally or seriously.