

OK, y'all forced me to say this:

I've noticed some of the barbs aimed at Josh Buice and G3—as well as at John MacArthur and Shepherds Conference. And obviously, in both instances, those criticisms attempt to indict *me* by implication.

It's curious that the critics of the speakers' lineups at those two conferences acknowledge that Buice (and presumably MacArthur) have made *their* position on social justice perfectly clear. Buice and MacArthur are nevertheless being publicly scolded, and in some cases insulted—*and their integrity is being questioned*—for *not* doing something the Bible never commands us to do anyway: namely, they haven't withdrawn all public fellowship from certain brothers in Christ over an issue that even some of the most vocal critics admit is not a matter of “heresy,” nor does it necessarily entail an actual denial of any cardinal truth.

Although Buice and MacArthur have called the "Social Justice" movement a subtle and potentially dangerous threat to the gospel, neither has suggested that everyone on the opposite side of this divisive issue must be immediately de-friended by all faithful believers and summarily disinvited from all evangelical conferences (including ones like G3—where whenever SJ was mentioned from the platform, the dangers of the movement *were* clearly pointed out).

Furthermore, no credible voice of biblical discernment that I know of has ever suggested that any of the men speaking at either conference are rank apostates. If such a case could be made, I'm pretty sure we'd have heard it broadcast loudly, rather than all the carping criticisms of Buice and MacArthur we *are* being treated to.

The theme of G3 was missions, not social justice, and every participant brought an edifying message on the theme. Of course, "Social Justice" *was* the singular theme of the *pre*-conference. And the message given *by every speaker in that event* was clear, focused, and biblical.

So what's the actual complaint? It seems to be mainly that lots of simpleminded people are "confused." And most who admit they are utterly bewildered are people whose main sources of "discernment" are online forums run by some perpetually truculent sensei of snark and sarcasm—one of those misanthropic perpetrators of fundamentalist road rage on the Information Superhighway.

No wonder they are confused. It's not Josh Buice's or John MacArthur's fault.

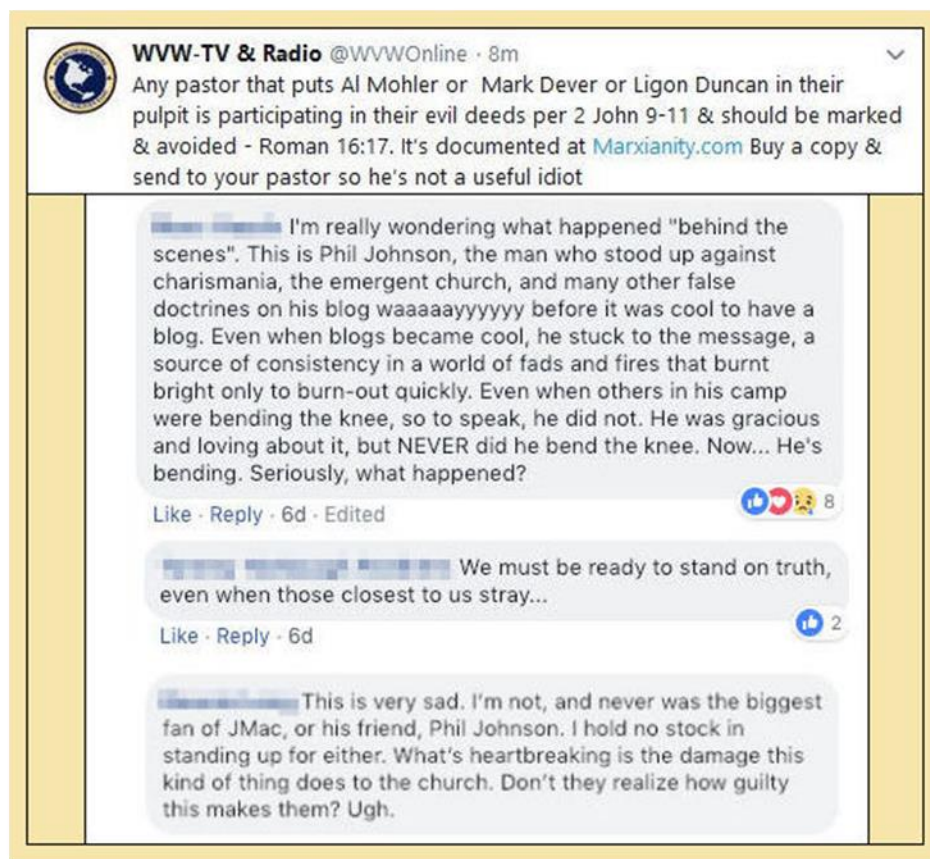
A Reply to Some Critics

by Phil Johnson
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A number of (mostly friendly) people have prodded me to respond further to those who are still publishing criticisms of the recent G3 Conference and the upcoming 2019 Shepherds' Conference. The critics' complaint is that some of the plenary sessions at both conferences feature men who have publicly placed themselves across the table from John MacArthur in the debate over social justice and the gospel, and critics say those two conferences are therefore muddying the whole issue. Here's the gist of the argument:

*If (as John MacArthur says) the evangelical movement's current preoccupation with "social justice" truly poses a threat to the clarity and content of the gospel, those who recognize the problem are commanded by Scripture to separate from those who don't. Doesn't the apostle say in Romans 16:17: "Watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; **avoid them**"?*

I'm a speaker at both conferences. I also helped draft the Dallas [Statement on Social Justice and the Gospel](#). Furthermore, I frequently remind my evangelical brethren about the biblical duty of separation from heretics and apostates. Therefore critics have targeted me personally in their broadsides. A few (egged on by commenters in various online forums) say they have now written off John MacArthur along with everyone else who has spoken or will speak this year at G3 and the Shepherds' Conference. The critics' remarks have become increasingly accusatory and intemperate:



We've strayed from the truth, they say. We're no longer reliable voices of biblical orthodoxy. We're compromisers, workers of evil, "useful idiots"—*guilty* before God. (One longtime

friend dismissed me by quoting what Spurgeon said when he ended his relationship with Joseph Parker.)

The argument, apparently, is that all evangelical leaders who have expressed agreement with *any* of the rhetoric that was used to tout the Social Justice Movement in the MLK50 and T4G2018 conferences are now thoroughly compromised and therefore should be banned from speaking at any conferences sponsored by signers of the Dallas statement.

I have (for the most part) declined to enter the controversy—partly because I haven’t the time or the inclination to try to answer every Tweet or FB comment that’s been made about this. But more important: I don’t have to weigh in on *every* controversy, especially when I’m the one being targeted. I’d have been quite happy to let my critics voice their opinion without any challenge or argument from me. They’re entitled to think what they like about an issue like this—or about me. It’s never been a requirement of mine to have everyone in my circle of fellowship be in perfect agreement with me on everything—*especially when it comes to the question of whom they befriend or associate with.*

That, however, happens to be the very tenet I’m now being criticized for. It’s been more than two months since they first expressed their disapproval, and apparently the critics are not going to stop stoking the scorn of my adversaries while needling me for a reply.

So here are a few bullet points:

- Romans 16:17-18, Galatians 1:8-9, and 2 John 7-11 expressly prohibit spiritual fellowship and ministry partnership with heretics or apostates—people who “do not serve our Lord Christ.” Those texts cannot be used to justify mandatory separation from men who affirm, proclaim, and defend all the core doctrines of the gospel. By citing those texts as commands that apply in this case, the critics are suggesting they think some of the speakers at G3 and the Shepherds’ Conference are apostates—or at least that they must be treated as such. Otherwise, the choice to retain or recuse those speakers would be an indifferent matter such as Paul describes in Romans 14, where he says, “So then each of us will give an account of himself to God. Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer” (vv. 12-13).
- Both conferences had issued invitations to speakers long before MLK50, T4G2018, and the Dallas Statement ignited a major controversy over “social justice.” (Large evangelical conferences generally invite their plenary speakers a year or more in advance, and these two are no exception.) I wasn’t involved in any decisions about whether changes should be made to either conference’s schedules, but I know the question was discussed by both sets of conference organizers. They obviously believed *uninviting* speakers would only deepen division and animosity over an issue that deserves a lot of dialogue—both public and private—before people start anathematizing one another or drawing hard lines of separation.
- To those who insist it’s “confusing” to have men who disagree on this issue preaching side by side at G3 or Shepherds’ Conference, my reply has several points:
 1. It would have sent a sinister and even more confusing message if conference organizers had instantly and unceremoniously disinvited men with whom they have for many years participated in ministry while waging battle side by side against common foes in a long string of hard-fought theological battles.
 2. G3 was launched this year with a preconference where the issue was dealt with in careful detail by a large cast of speakers. Furthermore, on those occasions where social justice was mentioned by *anyone* in the regular G3 sessions, the message consistently affirmed the Dallas Statement. Anyone claiming to be “confused” in the wake of G3 either wasn’t paying attention or

- doesn't really believe *facts* must supersede *feelings* in matters of biblical discernment.
3. Social justice isn't the theme for this year's Shepherds' Conference, either. The conference theme this year is *Faithfulness*, in honor of John MacArthur's 50th anniversary as pastor of Grace Community Church. The speakers are all men who have stood alongside John MacArthur for years in defense of gospel truth. We think it's premature to write them off as "unfaithful" because of what they have or haven't said so far about social justice.
 4. None of the speakers during the Shepherds' Conference will voice opposition to the Dallas Statement—and if anything like that ever *did* happen, those remarks would not go unchallenged or uncorrected. John MacArthur's long track record leaves no room for doubt about that.
 5. So those who claim to find the actual content of either conference "confusing" on social justice are either pathologically simple-minded, being willfully blind, deceiving themselves—or flat-out lying. What's genuinely **confusing** is the caustic rhetoric of those who claim the mere presence of speakers who hold differing views is a sign that John MacArthur and the rest of us who drafted the Dallas Statement are just double-minded men, backing away from the position we took when we signed that document.
 6. To those making that charge, let me say emphatically: It's a foolish and totally unwarranted claim. I used the word "stupid" in an earlier comment I made about this, and I later softened it because that's a biting word and offensive to many moms who deem it a mild form of profanity. But the dictionary definition ("*having or showing a great lack of intelligence or common sense*") conveys a description of the critics' claims that is entirely accurate.
- Those who have tried hardest to stoke the flames of controversy seem determined to make John MacArthur the bad guy. They argue like this: "*John MacArthur said 'social justice' is the most dangerous threat to the gospel yet, but now he denies that those promoting it are compromising the gospel. He's contradicting his own strongest argument!*"
 1. That is a reckless spin to put on the point MacArthur and the drafters of the Dallas Statement made.
 2. Here are John MacArthur's actual words: "It's my conviction that ***much of the rhetoric about this latest issue*** poses a more imminent and dangerous threat to the clarity and centrality of the gospel than any other recent controversy evangelicals have engaged in."
 3. Here also: "Over the years, I've fought a number of polemical battles against ideas that threaten the gospel. *This recent (and surprisingly sudden) detour in quest of 'social justice' is, I believe, the most subtle and dangerous threat so far.* In a series of blog posts over the next couple of weeks, I want to explain why. I'll review some of the battles we have fought to keep the gospel clear, precise, and at the center of our focus. We'll see why biblical justice has little in common with ***the secular, liberal idea of 'social justice.'***" And we'll analyze why ***the current campaign to move social issues like ethnic conflicts and economic inequality to the top of the evangelical agenda*** poses such a significant threat to the real message of gospel reconciliation."
 4. No one with a modicum of actual discernment would imagine MacArthur (or the Dallas Statement) is making the claim that everyone who thinks there might be something valid in the Social Justice Movement has already fallen into full-blown heresy and is touting a more deadly error than, say, the

mammon-worship of the prosperity gospel or the multifarious heterodoxies of Emergent Village.

5. In both of the statements quoted above, it should be clear that MacArthur is talking about those who echo leftist politicians' talking points while minimizing or ignoring the points of gospel truth that the Apostle Paul says are "of first importance" (1 Corinthians 15:3). The danger of which he speaks is a "**detour**"—abandonment of the gospel for a purely political agenda.
 6. Specifically, Pastor MacArthur is describing people whose rhetoric is loaded with the jargon of identity politics, intersectionality, feminism, and other pet issues of postmodern propagandists. He's talking about those who will radically twist the gospel message or even deny essential tenets of gospel truth in the name of social justice. He's responding to the stance taken by those who claim Martin Luther King's Socinianism is preferable to the gospel preaching of Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield because Edwards and Whitefield were not "woke" to the issues being championed under the rubric of social justice today.
 7. We have no reason to suspect or fear that any of the speakers who will be at Shepherds' Conference have secret, sinister motives to advance any of those extreme views. Furthermore, there are clearly some stark significant differences of opinion among those don't agree with the Dallas Statement. For example, Albert Mohler doesn't seem to be working with the same basic definition of *social justice* as, say, Jim Wallis of Sojourners.
- The definitions and differences within the Social Justice Movement *do* need to be carefully spelled out. Meanwhile, it's not unreasonable (much less sinful) for the key signers of the Dallas Statement to extend a generous measure of grace and patience to other Christian leaders with whom they have a long history of standing together on gospel issues. Again, these are men who have battled side by side for years against an array of pragmatic and theological fads.
 - The Dallas Statement rightly decries the Social Justice Movement for its divisive potential. Identity politics deliberately pits groups of Christians against one another. In contrast to that, we have no itch to hasten the Balkanization of the evangelical movement. The Dallas Statement is not even nine months old yet. Let these men have a decent opportunity to discuss their differences privately and thoroughly before demanding that they interdict one another.
 - Candidly, those who think hair-trigger separatism is a sure-fire safeguard against apostasy pose as great a threat to the testimony of the church as the purveyors of identity politics—with similarly sectarian results. The history of militant fundamentalism demonstrates that separatism *per se* is no safeguard against doctrinal drift, nor does it necessarily foster personal holiness. In fact, overzealous separatism breeds arrogance, malice, hypocrisy, smugness, undue severity, and a host of other bitter attitudes. Soon every difference of opinion about when to separate and whom to separate from is seen as just another reason to break fellowship. Some of the people posting angry tirades on the Internet about the speakers' lineups at G3 and the Shepherds' Conference seem to be deliberately encouraging that kind of hyper-separatism.
 - Friends of ours may disagree with some or all of those judgments, but to claim that we have disavowed the position we took in the Dallas Statement is to misrepresent us. To suggest that someone has *sinned* by including speakers at a conference who don't agree with the full force of our objection to the Social Justice Movement is to make a rule Scripture doesn't make. ***We are not obliged by Scripture to break fellowship with brothers who haven't apostatized.***

Finally, here's some correspondence (edited slightly for clarity) written by a friend of mine, who sent a portion of it to me for feedback, as he knew I've been dealing with these types of inquiries. My friend was responding to someone who appears to have been influenced by some of the more outraged voices, and was wondering how—in the wake of the Dallas Statement—John MacArthur could possibly justify including speakers at the Shepherds' conference who did not agree with the position he has so strongly and clearly affirmed. My friend replied:

You don't like that these speakers haven't tried to "silence" some of the more extreme voices parroting leftist rhetoric about "social justice," so even though we don't partner in ministry with any of those *more extreme* voices, you don't want us to minister with anyone who hasn't pointed out the error and condemned it either—which is a secondary step of separation.

(By the way, I'm skeptical of the claim that we have an *obligation* to speak out publicly about everything that is being decried as a "social injustice." I'm likewise skeptical of the claim that every Christian leader has an obligation to "silence" someone who preaches a sound Gospel but whose convictions on certain other matters differ.)

It's obvious that several respectable Christian leaders don't perceive the whole Social Justice Movement as a threat in the same way or to the same degree that John does. They see a different (and also real) set of threats, such as political loyalty over theological fidelity, apathy in the face of injustice, lack of love for one's neighbor, hyper-separatist attitudes, etc. I do earnestly hope they come around to see more clearly the threat pointed out in the Dallas Statement. I'm willing to give it more time to see if they will. In the meantime, the Trojan Horse has been exposed (via the Statement and other vocal and consistent pushback), so let's see if the danger will lessen before we advocate a massive split between esteemed brothers who have ministered together for years.

You and others might think that's naive of me, or it's just John MacArthur being partial to his friends, or inconsistent, or whatever. *I simply don't agree with you on that*, and at the end of the day I'm untroubled by any such charges. In fact, I think the loudest and most insistent public voices making such charges are doing themselves harm—marginalizing themselves and moving steadily to a further and further extreme.

Because my motives are to strive toward love and graciousness and patience, even as I proclaim and warn what the Bible does say about "social justice," I rejoice in the Gospel that I know every speaker at the Shepherds' Conference affirms and will preach. And my conscience is clear on all of that, and so I'll keep doing ministry the best way I can, for the eyes of the Lord and not of man. And I'll trust you to do the same, friend.

He's exactly right. It goes beyond Scripture to insist that Christian leaders *must* immediately sever all their public connections with any preacher who is attracted to an idea laden with subtle or potential dangers.

Indeed, to attach hyper-separatist doctrines to the Dallas Statement (in effect making multiple layers of quick-and-dirty separation mandatory between those who agree with the statement and those who do not) would seriously undermine the integrity of the statement itself. It is, after all, a call for unity among true believers. It would be a travesty to employ the Statement to foment even more unnecessary discord.