

A Final Appeal to Pastor John MacArthur on the Eve of His 'Strange Fire' Conference

As I write these words, the **Holy Spirit** is moving mightily around the earth, saving lost sinners, bringing rebels to repentance, healing sick bodies, setting captives free and, above all, glorifying the name of Jesus. According to **pastor John MacArthur**, however, this is actually “a farce and a scam.”

In his new book *Strange Fire*, he claims that this work of the Spirit actually represents “the explosive growth of a false church, as dangerous as any cult or **heresy** that has ever assaulted Christianity,” and he calls for a “collective war” against these alleged “pervasive abuses on the Spirit of God.”

Yes, Pastor MacArthur has branded the **charismatic movement** a “false church” and is calling for an all-out war against it.

For a man of his stature, a man who has done so much good for the body of Christ, this is a tragic error, a decided step in the wrong direction and a rejection of both the testimony of the written Word and the work of the Spirit today.

For the last several months, I have requested a face-to-face meeting with Pastor MacArthur to discuss our differences, but that request has been denied (either by him or by his team). Tomorrow, Oct. 16, he will begin a three-day “Strange Fire” conference, preparing the way for the release of his book next month. (I received an advanced review copy from the publisher; all quotes here are from the introduction and should be checked against the final text of the book.)

In this book, Pastor MacArthur argues, “The ‘**Holy Spirit**’ found in the vast majority of **charismatic** teaching and

practice bears no resemblance to the true Spirit of God as revealed in Scripture," even accusing the modern **charismatic movement** of "attributing the work of the devil to the Holy Spirit."

In fact, he claims that leaders of the movement are "Satan's false teachers, marching to the beat of their own illicit desires, gladly propagat[ing] his errors. They are spiritual swindlers, con men, crooks, and charlatans."

This is divisive and destructive language based on misinformation and exaggeration, as Pastor MacArthur attributes the extreme errors of a tiny minority to countless hundreds of thousands of godly leaders worldwide.

I have worked side by side with some of these fine men and women myself, precious saints who have risked their lives for the name of Jesus, giving themselves sacrificially to touch a hurting and dying world with the gospel, literally shedding their blood rather than compromise their testimonies—yet an internationally recognized pastor calls many of them "Satan's **false teachers** ... spiritual swindlers, con men, crooks, and charlatans."

May the Lord forgive him for these rash words.

He claims, "As a movement, they have persistently ignored the truth about the **Holy Spirit** and with reckless license set up an idol spirit in the house of God, blaspheming the third member of the Trinity in His own name."

So Pastor MacArthur, in writing and obviously with much forethought, is accusing hundreds of millions of believers of **blaspheming the Spirit**, thereby pronouncing them to be sinners damned to hell, since blasphemy of the Spirit is an unforgivable sin (Mark 3:29).

Words fail to express how grievous this is.

He claims, "In recent history, no other movement has done more to damage the cause of the gospel, to distort the truth, and to smother the articulation of sound doctrine," going as far as to say that "**charismatic theology** has made no contribution to true biblical theology or interpretation; rather, it represents a deviant mutation of truth."

Aside from the sweeping inaccuracy of these charges—just a reading of one book, like Dr. Gordon Fee's 992-page volume *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul*, demolishes his position—what is truly painful is the knowledge that Pastor MacArthur's conference and book will do far more harm than good, driving hungry believers away from the Spirit's work today and failing to bring needed correction to the real abuses that do exist because he has so overstated his case.

Although it would take a short book to respond to Pastor MacArthur's *Strange Fire*, here are five rebuttals that need to be made:

1) Pastor MacArthur draws attention to bizarre practices like "toking the Ghost" (as in "getting high on the Holy Ghost") or barking like dogs, things I have never seen in 42 years in charismatic-Pentecostal circles around the world and, in reality, practices that are no more representative of charismatics than Fred Phelps of Westboro Baptist Church and his "God Hates Fags" signs are representative of Baptists.

Those reading MacArthur's book, however, would come to the completely erroneous conclusion that such bizarre, virtually unheard-of practices were the norm.

2) Pastor MacArthur points to some of the shameful, inexcusable scandals that have taken place among charismatic leaders, using this as proof that the Holy Spirit is not at work in our midst. Aside from the fact that Paul knew better than to do with this the Corinthians—he recognized what the

Spirit was doing while correcting their errors and fleshly sins—Pastor MacArthur fails to realize these scandals are connected to celebrity and pride more than charismatic doctrines and practices.

He also fails to realize that charismatic and Pentecostal leaders have addressed these issues for decades (until this day)—he wrongly claims that virtually no one dares to correct these abuses—and, more importantly, he downplays the many scandals that have plagued cessationist leaders as well. (There is even a website devoted to exposing Southern Baptist sexual predators.)

3) While attributing gross doctrinal error to **charismatics**—in a pre-conference video, pastor Steve Lawson claims the fundamental problem with charismatics is their lack of serious engagement with the Word—Pastor MacArthur himself is guilty of poor exegesis of the scriptural passages that point to the ongoing, miraculous work of the Spirit today.

He also ignores the fact that the great majority of those opposing his message on “lordship salvation” are cessationists, many of them preaching a very loose “once saved, always saved” doctrine that Pastor MacArthur himself opposes.

4) In his own pre-conference video, Pastor MacArthur makes the absolutely false claim that 90 percent of **charismatics** worldwide are **Word of Faith**—it is actually a fairly small percentage, one which includes almost none of the major Pentecostal denominations. And so he mistakenly attributes an extreme prosperity doctrine to the vast majority of charismatics worldwide (meaning, the false belief that Jesus died to make us rich, as opposed to the true belief that God meets the needs of His people and blesses us to be a blessing to others).

Pastor MacArthur also takes the poorly chosen (or downright

erroneous) words of a few Word of Faith leaders regarding the deity of Jesus and claims that this represents most (or all) charismatics. Again, nothing could be further from the truth.

5) The subtitle of Pastor MacArthur's book is "The Danger of Offending the **Holy Spirit** With Counterfeit Worship," yet it is the charismatic movement worldwide that is frequently the most devoted to worship, producing a steady flow of powerful new hymns and songs and hosting gatherings that last for hours or days, just devoted to worship and adoration of the Lord.

But because these gatherings are marked by biblically based displays of emotion and joy and passion, Pastor MacArthur writes them off as aberrant.

In the end, what saddens me the most is that this servant of the Lord fails to recognize what the Spirit is doing today. And so, rather than joining with his charismatic brothers and sisters to help spark renewal in the many dead and dying churches (many of them cessationist!) and to help reclaim the younger generation with the realities of a risen Savior, Pastor MacArthur has placed himself in opposition to much of the Spirit's work, thereby hindering the spread of the gospel more than helping it.

This also means he will not be able to help us rebuke error and deception and abuse, since he will turn off his intended audience with his inaccurate claims and extreme rhetoric.

And so, even though it seems futile at this point, once again, on the eve of the "Strange Fire" conference, I appeal to Pastor MacArthur to reconsider his ways, to re-examine what the Word really says about these issues, to travel to the nations and see firsthand what the Spirit is doing, and to sit with charismatic leaders to seek the Lord together for His best for the church and the world.

It's not too late, sir, to humble yourself under God's mighty hand, and I humble myself before you as I write these words,

reaching out to you once more in the name of Jesus and urging you to recognize and embrace the Spirit's true fire today.

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