

# An Appeal to John MacArthur to Embrace God's True Fire

According to church historian Vinson Synan, the Brownsville Revival (1995-2000) was the longest-running local church revival in American history, and as an eyewitness and participant in more than 1,500 **revival** services or classes during those years, I can testify to the fact that day after day, Jesus was exalted, the Scriptures were preached, sinners were called to repentance and believers were encouraged to surrender their lives afresh to God.

Today, almost 20 years since the revival began, the good fruit of that outpouring continues to grow, as many of those transformed by the Spirit in Pensacola are now serving as missionaries and church planters and teachers and preachers and leaders around the globe, feeding the hungry, establishing orphanages, bringing the Good News to the unreached and raising their children and grandchildren in the truth of the Lord.

Already in 1998, award-winning religion journalist Steve Rabey could testify to the impact of the **revival** in his book *Revival in Brownsville: Pensacola, Pentecostalism, and the Power of American Revivalism*, although he said it would be a century before the full impact of the revival could be assessed.

Pastor John MacArthur had a very different take on what was happening in Brownsville, writing back then, "I was down in Florida and people are being rocked down there by this Pensacola craziness that's going on in the name of **revival** and people flipping and flopping and diving on the floor and gyrating and speaking in bizarre and unintelligible fashion and all of this kind of wild thing is going on. And they keep saying this is God, this is of God."

He continued, "Can I be very straightforward with you? It is an offense to our rational, truth-revealing God, it is an offense to the true work of His Son, it is an offense to the true work of the **Holy Spirit** to use the names of God or of Christ or of the Holy Spirit in any mindless, emotional orgy marked by irrational, sensual and fleshly behavior produced by altered states of consciousness, peer pressure, heightened expectation or suggestibility."

What? A powerful, Word-based, Jesus-exalting move of the Spirit called a "mindless, emotional orgy marked by irrational, sensual and fleshly behavior produced by altered states of consciousness, peer pressure, heightened expectation or suggestibility"?

During the **revival**, I calculated that someone visiting us for five days, attending the day sessions, night services, Sunday school and Sunday morning service would hear the Word taught and preached for almost a dozen hours, while students in our ministry school would be immersed in the Word for another 16 hours a week. Yet because we freely welcomed the move of the Spirit—although not as described by Pastor MacArthur—we were allegedly experiencing a mindless, irrational, emotional orgy.

He further claimed, "That is socio-psycho manipulation and mesmerism and it is a prostitution of the glorious revelation of God taught clearly and powerfully to an eager, attentive and controlled mind. What feeds sensual desires pragmatically or ecstatically cannot honor God. You have to preach the truth to the mind. That's where the real battle is fought. So we bring God to people through His Word. That's the only way we can do it."

Actually, to be scriptural, we must preach to both heart and mind—that is the pattern throughout the Word of God—and we bring people to God by the Word and the Spirit.

That was the method of the prophets, the method of Jesus, the

method of His disciples and the method He bequeathed on all generations until He returned. (See John 7:37-39; 14:12; Luke 24:49; Acts 1:8; 2:17-18, 39; 1 Cor 1:7; 2:1-5; 14:39; and James 5:14-15. Note that the Spirit's outpouring was for the last days—not just the days of the apostles.)

The Scriptures are so clear on this that Paul described a decent, orderly service like this: "When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation" (1 Cor 14:26, ESV). That was a proper gathering according to Paul.

Was everything done perfectly in Brownsville? Of course not. Things were not done perfectly in the New Testament churches; things were not done perfectly in the Great Awakening or the Welsh Revival or any other outpouring; and, the truth be told, things are not done perfectly in any of our churches today, charismatic and non-charismatic.

And it is only natural that when God moves powerfully, there will be excesses that need to be corrected and abuses that need to be put in order. But I, for one, would rather have the noise (and mess) of the maternity ward than the deathly quiet of a cemetery.

As Daniel Rowlands, the Welsh revivalist, replied to the criticism of John Thornton of England in the early 1760s, "You English blame us, the Welsh, and speak against us and say 'Jumpers! Jumpers!' But we, the Welsh, have something also to allege against you, and we most justly say of you, 'Sleepers! Sleepers!'"

Jonathan Edwards also recognized that "a reformation, after long continued and almost universal deadness, should at first, when the revival is new, be attended with ... imprudences, irregularities, and [a] mixture of delusion"—and he wrote this with reference to the Great Awakening.

A Scottish contemporary of Edwards, John Bonar said, "It is

too much for the clay to assume to itself the judgment of how it befits the potter to work. If the careless are brought to repentance,—the profane to holiness,—the unclean to purity;—if the old man with his deeds is put off, and the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness, is put on, that is the work of the Spirit of God—the fruit of the truth as it is in Jesus. The manner in which these things may be wrought in us or in others may be designed by God to try even his own people as to whether they will know his hand, amid the imperfection with which every work of God is marred when it passes through the hands of men.”

Today, the **Holy Spirit** continues to move in wonderful and sometimes unusual ways, overpowering some people with His presence, producing in others a deep conviction of sin that moves them to cry out and groan, producing in still others a glorious and inexpressible joy that moves them to dance and shout, and confirming the Word with signs following—the greatest sign of all being radically changed lives for the glory of God.

Yet rather than recognize this, Pastor MacArthur claims that charismatics have “stolen the Holy Spirit and created a golden calf and they are dancing around the golden calf as if it is the Holy Spirit. ... The Charismatic version of the Holy Spirit is that golden calf ... around which they dance with their dishonoring exercises”—and in this scathing indictment he names fine godly leaders like Mike Bickle and Lou Engle, claiming that they are guilty of blaspheming the Spirit.

Recognizing the many wonderful things that Pastor MacArthur has done for God’s people and for the name of Jesus, I urge him to sit down with these leaders whose ministries he attacks (or to sit with me as a former leader in the Brownsville Revival) to listen to their extensive teaching of the Scriptures and to meet with some of the thousands of young people who have been impacted by their lives and who are now burning bright for Jesus, reaching the lost on college

campuses, seeking God earnestly in day and night prayer, contending for the lives of the unborn and pursuing holiness in the fear of the Lord.

I too reject many abuses in the charismatic movement—including our flesh-exalting personality cults; our carnal prosperity message; our manifestation mania; our superficial sensationalism; our mindless gullibility; our cheapening of the word “apostolic”; our constant fascination with the latest trend—but I recognize these as part of the dirty bathwater to be thrown out rather than the precious baby to be nurtured.

The truth is that the same Word that calls us to test all things and hold fast to the good (1 Thess. 5:21) is the same Word that calls us not to quench the Spirit (1 Thess. 5:19).

And so I appeal to Pastor MacArthur, my senior in the Lord: Do not put out the Spirit’s fire!

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