

John MacArthur, Strange Fire and Blasphemy of the Spirit

Pastor John MacArthur has announced a “strange fire” conference to be held this October, claiming that part of the charismatic movement “offers to God unacceptable worship, distorted worship. It blasphemes the Holy Spirit. It attributes to the Holy Spirit even the work of Satan.”

If these charges are true, this means that many leaders in the **charismatic movement** have committed the unpardonable sin and are therefore hell-bound. If these charges are not true, Pastor MacArthur has seriously overstepped his bounds and misused the **Word of God**.

And it is only fair to ask whether Pastor MacArthur, in his rightful zeal to correct excesses or errors in the charismatic movement—what he calls “strange fire”—is also guilty of rejecting the true fire. Does he embrace the glorious things the **Holy Spirit** is doing worldwide, resulting in the salvation of tens of millions of souls, or does he write them off as the result of emotionalism and deception?

Before addressing these very weighty questions, let me express my deep appreciation for Pastor MacArthur. He has been in high-profile ministry for decades without a hint of a sexual or monetary scandal. He has been an unashamed witness for Jesus before the world; he has preached the cross and the blood; he has renounced cheap grace and emphasized the importance of the lordship of the Son of God; and he has been a devoted student of the Scriptures.

In all these ways, if we had more leaders like **John MacArthur**, the church and the world would be in much better shape.

At the same time, he has made sweeping, critical statements, often throwing out the baby with the bathwater, not only

rejecting the dangerous excesses and extremes in the charismatic movement but also labeling some genuine works of the Spirit as “**charismatic chaos.**”

The fact is that there has never been a true outpouring of the Spirit that has not been controversial, be it in the ministry of Jesus, at Pentecost in Acts 2 or throughout church history, right up to our day. Yet all too often, sincere leaders like Pastor MacArthur have failed to discern what God was doing in the midst of the human emotion and response.

One church historian pointed out that during the Great Awakening in 18th-century America, the biggest difference between Jonathan Edwards, the preeminent leader of the awakening, and Charles Chauncey, the foremost critic of the awakening, was that Edwards focused on the wheat while Chauncey focused on the chaff. Has Pastor MacArthur been guilty of doing the same thing when it comes to the charismatic movement?

Without a doubt, there are horrific things being done in the name of Jesus and the Spirit, often on **Christian TV** for the whole world to see—and this stuff is downright shameful, bringing reproach to the reputation of the Lord. Along with other charismatic leaders, I have renounced these things for decades. But is it the responsibility of every **charismatic-Pentecostal** pastor and leader to renounce these things all the time?

Pastor MacArthur has called on his Pentecostal brothers and sisters to stand up and speak out against these abuses, joining him at his upcoming conference; but if a pastor is shepherding his flock and feeding them God’s Word and his people are not guilty of these abuses or watching these TV preachers, why is it his responsibility to address these errors? Does Pastor MacArthur feel the responsibility to monitor the preaching of tens of thousands of non-charismatic pastors across the country and publicly renounce their errors?

Why, then, must Pentecostal and charismatic pastors renounce extremes in their movement to somehow prove their orthodoxy?

And which is worse? To preach a carnal **prosperity message** or to give people false assurance that, once they are saved, no matter how they live, no matter what they do, even if they renounce Jesus, they are still saved? Which message will result in more people being misled and finding themselves in hell?

Pastor MacArthur rightly renounces the carnal prosperity message, yet many non-charismatics who follow him embrace an extremely dangerous version of the “once saved, always saved” doctrine. Why the double standard here?

Again, I am not for a moment excusing doctrinal errors, emotional manipulation, financial greed or other spiritual abuses often perpetuated in the name of the Spirit, but it is absolutely outrageous that Pastor MacArthur claims, “The charismatic movement is largely the reason the church is in the mess it is today. In virtually every area where church life is unbiblical, you can attribute it to the charismatic movement. In virtually every area—bad theology, superficial worship, ego, prosperity gospel, personality elevation. All of that comes out of the charismatic movement.”

And he is quite wrong when he states, “Its theology is bad. It is unbiblical. It is bad. It is aberrant. It is destructive to people because it promises what it can’t deliver, and then God gets blamed when it doesn’t come. It is a very destructive movement.”

In reality, more people have been saved—wonderfully saved—as a result of the Pentecostal-charismatic movement worldwide than through any other movement in church history (to the tune of perhaps a half-billion souls), as documented recently in Allan Heaton Anderson’s *To the Ends of the Earth: Pentecostalism and the Transformation of World Christianity*. And professor Craig

Keener has provided overwhelming testimony to the reality of God's miraculous power worldwide today (see his brilliant two-volume study *Miracles*).

Tragically, rather than recognizing the outpouring of the Spirit worldwide—God's true fire, falling in abundance in many nations—and focusing on the spiritual deadness that exists in many Spirit-denying churches, Pastor MacArthur has chosen to focus on aberrations and extremes in the charismatic movement, even making the extremely dangerous claims that charismatics are blaspheming the Spirit and attributing "to the Holy Spirit even the work of Satan."

To be perfectly clear, I am not for a second claiming that Pastor MacArthur is blaspheming the Spirit (God forbid!), but in the New Testament, blasphemy of the Spirit is knowingly attributing the works of the Spirit to Satan (Mark 3:23-30), and I am far more concerned about denying the true fire than I am about putting out every aberrant charismatic brush fire.

Let God's holy fire fall!

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