

The 'Strange Fire' of John MacArthur

As a lifelong Pentecostal-charismatic, I recommend that every Pentecostal-charismatic leader read *Strange Fire* by John MacArthur. I say this because we need to see how the bizarre "spiritual" behavior and doctrinal extremes by some in our movement are viewed by those on the outside, and used to whitewash the entire movement.

We have done a very poor job of addressing these problems from within, so I do not doubt that God has raised up a voice that is fundamentally opposed to our movement to address these extremes. If God could use a pagan Babylonian king to discipline His people in Israel for their sins (see Jer. 25:8-11), could He not use a merciless fundamentalist preacher to point out our shortcomings?

That being said, MacArthur's latest book does not represent an honest search for truth. It is obvious that his mind was already made up when he began his research for *Strange Fire*, and he found what he was looking for. He presents a circular argument, beginning with a faulty premise and proceeding with selective anecdotal evidence that determines the outcome.

He begins with a commitment to cessationism, i.e., the belief that the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit were withdrawn from the church after the death of the 12 apostles and the completion of the writings of the New Testament. That being the case, then modern expressions of spiritual gifts must be false. He then utilizes the selective anecdotal evidence to buttress his presupposition, which leads him back to his starting point of cessation.

It seems that MacArthur wants to believe the worst about the movement of which he writes. At times I felt he was

embellishing the bad to make it even worse. For example, Oral Roberts was not a Christian brother with whom he had profound differences but a heretic who did much damage to the body of Christ—"the first of the fraudulent healers to capture TV, paving the way for the parade of spiritual swindlers who have come after him," he wrote.

Make no mistake about it, MacArthur is not out to bring correction to a sector of Christianity with which he disagrees; his goal is to destroy a movement he considers false, heretical and dangerous.

MacArthur is either unaware or purposely ignores the historical evidence for the continuation of the miraculous gifts of the Spirit as was presented in my book, *2000 Years of Charismatic Christianity*. He ignores clear statements of church fathers such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Tertullian and Augustine about healings and miracles in their time. He uses Augustine's statement about tongues being "adapted to the times" as an argument that the gifts had ceased. He ignores, however, Augustine's later works, including *Retractions*, in which he acknowledges the ongoing miraculous work of the Spirit and tells of miracles of which he is personally aware.

MacArthur's biblical argument for cessation is also very weak. He relies primarily on Ephesians 2:20, where Paul told the Ephesian believers that they were being built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. He then argues that the gift of apostleship was only for the foundational period of the church, which in his mind is the first century. He goes on to say that the other gifts of the Spirit passed away with the gift of the apostle.

This, at its best, is convoluted thinking that goes far beyond what the text actually says. Paul's point in this passage is not to teach cessationism, but to show the common faith of Gentile and Jewish believers in that both are built on the same foundation, which is Jesus Himself, and this fact is

witnessed to by the Old (prophetic) and New Testament (apostolic) writings.

MacArthur's disdain for women and their prominence in the Pentecostal-charismatic movement spills over when he refers to 1 Corinthians 14:34, which carries the admonition for women to be silent in the churches. He then says, "Given the nature of typical Pentecostal and charismatic church services, simply following that final stipulation would end most of the modern counterfeit." He fails, however, to address the fact that Scripture itself states that women will have a prominent voice when the Holy Spirit is poured out on all flesh, as Peter so eloquently stated in Acts 2:17-18. The prominence of women, therefore, may be seen as an indication that the modern Pentecostal-Charismatic movement is a genuine work of the Holy Spirit.

In summary, we who embrace the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in the Church and the world must not flinch or compromise our commitment because of *Strange Fire*. At the same time, may we be diligent to address the errors and extremes that always creep in to any Spirit-filled movement, whether the church in Corinth, early Methodism or the modern Pentecostal-charismatic movement.

This article originally appeared at .

Eddie L. Hyatt is a seasoned minister of the gospel, having served as a pastor, teacher, missionary and professor of theology in the U.S. and Canada and having ministered in India, Indonesia, England, Ireland, Sweden, Poland and Bulgaria. His ministry is characterized by a unique blend of the anointing of the Holy Spirit with academic excellence and over 40 years of ministerial experience. Visit him online at .