

Time to Talk, Not Fight: A Response to John MacArthur's Ministry

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On July 25, Fred Butler, writing on behalf of Pastor John MacArthur, posted an article on the Grace to You website in response to my recent articles on CharismaNews. With a desire to be constructive rather than combative, I write this response, calling once again on Pastor MacArthur and his team to sit down face to face with me and other **charismatic** leaders, putting the scriptural and practical issues on the table together in reverence before God.

According to Mr. Butler, "For a month now people have been contacting our ministry insisting that we answer Dr. Brown's criticisms. Those folks would say John MacArthur wrongfully equates that heretical nonsense saturating TBN with 'sound' **charismatic** continuationists. If John was truly honest about engaging and taking on genuine continuationists, he would stop going after the TBN health-N-wealth crowd who are easy to attack, and interact with Dr. Brown who represents those 'sound' charismatics."

Mr. Butler's guest article on Pastor MacArthur's website, along with an article on his personal blog, provides a response to the concerns I raised.

While Mr. Butler is very appreciative of my Jewish **apologetics** work (specifically, my five-volume series on answering Jewish objections to Jesus), my stand on moral and cultural issues (articulated in the book *A Queer Thing Happened to America*), and my defense of the modern state of Israel, with regard to

my view of fellow charismatics, he claims I am “completely off the rails.”

How else, he asks, could I endorse or work with people whom he calls “wackos” and “charlatans”? Obviously, I must be terribly lacking in **discernment**, and so he can no longer recommend my other writings without issuing a “clear warning” as well.

Perhaps Mr. Butler should look at this from a different angle. Specifically, if he believes I had the biblical scholarship and spiritual sensibility to produce those works—some of which he calls “stellar”—perhaps I know who these alleged “wackos” and “charlatans” really are and understand more accurately what they really believe. And perhaps it is because of careful study of the Word that I am more affirming of the Spirit’s work today.

Mr. Butler writes, “Though Dr. Brown has written so thoughtfully on important aspects of **apologetics**, he dismisses the serious theological errors prevalent within the **charismatic** movement as mere ‘excesses.’”

Actually, when I speak of “excesses,” I’m referring to emotionalism or hyperspirituality or silly practices; where there are “serious theological errors” among **charismatics**, they need to be rebuked sharply, just as the serious theological errors among non-charismatics need to be sharply rebuked.

But before I suggest a positive way forward, let me respond to two major points raised by Mr. Butler.

First, he questions whether I have truly addressed abuses and extremes in the **charismatic movement**.

Actually, I raised a number of relevant issues in my books *The End of the American Gospel Enterprise*, *How Saved Are We?* and *It’s Time to Rock the Boat*, all of which speak to primarily charismatic audiences, while one of my books is

entitled *Whatever Happened to the Power of God: Is the Charismatic Church "Slain in the Spirit" or Down for the Count?* (These books date back as far as 1989; the title and subtitle of the last one speaks for itself.)

My forthcoming book, *Hyper-Grace: Exposing the Dangers of the Modern Grace Message* (due out January 2014), focuses on doctrinal abuses found primarily in the **charismatic** church, as do quite a number of my recent articles, including the widely read "Sex Symbols Who Speak in Tongues."

So, the answer is a categorical yes. I have addressed abuses and extremes in the **charismatic movement** for decades, and I continue to address them. In fact, if Pastor MacArthur recognized the glorious things the **Holy Spirit** is doing around the world, I would gladly join him in exposing and rebuking the truly "strange fire."

Second, Mr. Butler took exception to my charge that Pastor MacArthur was using a double standard by calling out **charismatic** abuses while failing to do the same with those who held to a cheap, once-saved-always-saved gospel, pointing out that, to the contrary, this has been the hallmark of his ministry for decades.

I certainly understand Mr. Butler's indignation here, but my point was simply this: Since, in my opinion, easy-believism is far more pervasive than is the alleged "strange fire," and since, I believe, it is even more deadly than a carnal prosperity message (though both must be renounced), why isn't Pastor MacArthur holding an "Easy Believism" conference? And why is he putting the blame for the majority of **false doctrine** and moral scandals at the feet of charismatics?

Mr. Butler urges me to "follow John's example with regard to [Mike] Bickle, [Lou] Engle, and [Cindy] Jacobs"—some of those dubbed "wackos" by Mr. Butler—"rather than attack someone"—meaning John MacArthur—"who has spent his life as a

caring, faithful shepherd of the sheep.”

To be clear, I am not attacking Pastor MacArthur, whom I commended in so many ways in my first article and whom I referred to as “my senior in the Lord” in my second article. Rather, I have respectfully taken issue with the way he has lambasted others, some of whom have also spent their lives as caring, faithful shepherds of the sheep.

In contrast, I am the one saying, “Let us sit together as servants of the same Lord, with humble hearts and Bibles open, and let us dialogue face to face.”

Perhaps in such a setting, Pastor MacArthur and his team would realize that some of those they have publicly scorned are actually devoted and sound men and women of God. (Mr. Butler brings a number of charges against leaders with whom I have ministered over the years, but this is not the place to respond to his guilt-by-association accusations. At the same time, to be perfectly clear, the fact that I post articles on CharismaNews certainly doesn’t mean I agree with every speaker who advertises on the website.)

Pastor MacArthur and his team slam the **charismatic movement** for being thoroughly unbiblical, but while some aspects of the movement are clearly in serious error, cessationism must also be challenged as unbiblical. This has been done by brilliant **charismatic** thinkers like Craig Keener, one of the world’s foremost New Testament scholars, and J.P. Moreland, one of the most respected Christian philosophers today, just to name two. This means that as Pastor MacArthur and his colleagues are speaking out against strange fire, they are also guilty of putting forth the false teaching of cessationism.

In the most constructive tone possible, I issue an invitation for Pastor MacArthur and his top theologians to spend a day with me and several other **charismatic** scholars, probing the Word together on this important subject. I’m sure all of us

are extremely busy, but wouldn't this glorify the Lord and send an example to others in the body? And perhaps we could actually learn from each other.

If a public debate-dialogue was preferred, I would welcome it in a heartbeat, also believing we could model a spirit of Christian unity and respect in the process, just as Dr. James White and I have sought to do with our debates on Calvinism. In fact, Dr. White and I actually prefer to debate on the same team, against others, than against one another.

And I would appeal once more to Pastor MacArthur and his colleagues to modify the rhetoric they are using, since "blasphemy of the Spirit," as defined in Mark 3:22-31, is attributing the works of the **Holy Spirit**, performed by Jesus, to Satan, and it is an unforgivable sin. Yet Pastor MacArthur and his colleagues freely use this expression when critiquing many leaders in the **charismatic** movement. This is inaccurate, divisive and harmful.

And so I humbly appeal to Pastor MacArthur and his team to recognize what the Spirit is genuinely doing today—and it is not just among the "gullible," as Mr. Butler claims—to reconsider their stance on cessationism, to be more careful with their rhetoric, and, at the least, to sit down together with me and others for frank, Christ-honoring discussion, **prayer** and interaction. Why not?

I could easily avoid this subject, but I feel it is right to pursue this in the spirit of Ephesians 4:1-7, where Paul exhorts us to make every effort to be united in the Spirit under the lordship of Jesus.

And if I did not respect and honor John MacArthur, I would not write this at all.

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