

The False Doctrine Behind the 'Strange Fire' of John MacArthur

In his latest book, *Strange Fire*, John MacArthur viciously labels the **Pentecostal/charismatic** movement as “a false church as dangerous as any cult or heresy that has ever assaulted Christianity.”

As I have read and reread his polemic, one thing that becomes clear is that MacArthur's entire theological outlook is guided and determined by his commitment to the Calvinistic doctrine of cessationism, the belief that the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit were withdrawn from the church after the death of the original apostles of Christ. This, however, is a false doctrine that cannot be substantiated by either Scripture or church history.

Those who succeeded the original apostles as leaders in the churches make no mention of a cessation theory. On the other hand, they give clear testimony of miraculous gifts and healings occurring in their day. I have documented this in my book *2000 Years of Charismatic Christianity*, published by Charisma House. Consider the following quotes from church fathers recognized by both Protestants and Catholics as the legitimate successors of the original apostles:

- **Justin Martyr (100-165):** “For the **prophetical gifts** remain with us even to the present time. Now it is possible to see among us women and men who possess gifts of the Spirit of God.”
- **Irenaeus (125-200):** “In like manner we do also hear many brethren in the church who possess **prophetic gifts** and through the Spirit speak all kinds of languages. ... Yes, moreover, as I have said, the dead even have been raised

up, and remained among us for many years.”

- **Tertullian (150-240):** “For seeing that we too acknowledge the spiritual *charismata*, or gifts, we too have merited the attainment of the prophetic gift ... and heaven knows how many distinguished men, to say nothing of the common people, have been cured either of devils or of their sicknesses.”
- **Novation (210-280):** “This is he [the **Holy Spirit**] who places prophets in the church, instructs teachers, directs tongues, gives powers and healings, does wonderful works ... and arranges whatever gifts there are of the *charismata*; and thus making the Lord’s church everywhere, and in all, perfected and completed.”
- **Origen (185-284):** “Some give evidence of their having received through this faith a marvelous power by the cures which they perform, invoking no other name over those who need their help than that of the God of all things, along with Jesus and a mention of his history.”
- **Augustine (354-430):** In his work *The City of God*, Augustine tells of healings and miracles that he has observed firsthand and then says, “I am so pressed by the promise of finishing this work that I cannot record all the miracles I know.”

These testimonies clearly demonstrate that spiritual gifts continued to be common in the church from the Day of Pentecost and up to the beginning of the fourth century. The Episcopal scholar Morton Kelsey was correct when he said, “These men were well aware of Paul’s list of the gifts of the Spirit and what it included. In no place do they suggest that any of them had dropped away.”

In an appendix entitled “Voices From Church History,” MacArthur seeks to substantiate his doctrine of cessation from church history. Interestingly, the earliest quote he presents is from John Chrysostom (344-407), who refers to his ignorance of spiritual gifts and their cessation. The reason MacArthur

begins with Chrysostom is that there is no evidence of a cessation theory prior to this time.

MacArthur next quotes Augustine's statement that the tongues at Pentecost were a sign "adapted to the times" and had passed away. But what he fails to mention is that Augustine's views on this matter changed with time and that he later fully embraced the continued work of the Holy Spirit and His gifts in the church (see the above quote). Nonetheless, Augustine's earlier comments were taken up by those not experiencing spiritual gifts and used to justify their experience, or lack thereof.

While some articulated a theory of cessation to explain the lack of miracles and spiritual gifts in their midst, others throughout history have acknowledged that the problem has been a lack of faith and holiness within the church. This was the view of A.J. Gordon, 18th-century Baptist pastor and founder of Gordon College in Boston, who wrote, "It is not altogether strange that when the church forgot her citizenship in heaven and began to establish herself in luxury and splendor on earth, she should cease to exhibit the supernatural gifts of heaven."

John Wesley, the unflappable Oxford scholar, revivalist and founder of Methodism, showed his disdain for the doctrine of cessation when he wrote, "I do not recollect any Scripture wherein we are taught that miracles were to be confined within the limits of the apostolic age or the Cyprian age, or of any period of time, longer or shorter, even till the restitution of all things." After reading a book that defended the continuance of spiritual gifts in the church, Wesley wrote the following statement in the *Journal of John Wesley*:

"I was fully convinced of what I had once suspected ... that the grand reason why the miraculous gifts were so soon withdrawn was not only that faith and holiness were well nigh lost, but that dry, formal orthodox men began even then to ridicule

whatever gifts they had not themselves, and to decry them all as either madness or imposture.”

Beginning with the dawn of the 20th century, the church has seen an explosion of the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit around the world. Churches old and new are embracing this dynamic **work of the Spirit** in their midst, and this very diverse movement now numbers over 600 million worldwide and is growing at the rate of 9 million per year. This Pentecostal/charismatic movement that MacArthur so detests is actually a fulfillment of **biblical prophecy** for Peter, who, in explaining the tongues on the Day of Pentecost, declared:

“And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God, that I will pour out of My Spirit on all flesh; your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. And on My menservants and on My maidservants I will pour out My Spirit in those days; and they shall prophesy” (Acts 2:17-18).

I pray that God will enable John MacArthur to see what is obvious to so many: that the Pentecostal/charismatic movement, though having many human imperfections, is a genuine work of the Holy Spirit, empowering the people of God everywhere to be witnesses of Jesus Christ and His salvation in these last days.

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