

To My Fundamentalist Brother John MacArthur: Grace to You Too

Fundamentalist pastor John MacArthur is a gifted preacher, author and lover of Scripture. His *Grace to You* radio program points countless people to the Bible, and his Master's Seminary trains hundreds of ministry leaders. He's a staunch Calvinist, but that doesn't make him any less my brother in Christ.

Unfortunately, MacArthur can't say the same about me—and that's sad. In his new book *Strange Fire*, he declares in no uncertain terms that anyone who embraces any form of charismatic or Pentecostal theology does not worship the true God.

My brother in Christ has written me off.

In John MacArthur's rigid world, anybody who has sought prayer for healing, claimed a miracle, received a prayer language, prophesied, sensed God speaking to them, felt God's presence in an emotional way or fallen down on the floor after receiving prayer has already stepped out of the bounds of orthodoxy.

MacArthur says charismatics think they worship God but that actually we are worshipping a golden calf. "Every day millions of charismatics offer praise to a patently false image of the Holy Spirit," MacArthur says early in the book. "No other movement has done more damage to the cause of the gospel."

He doesn't just write off fringe elements of our movement; he skewers the original founders of Pentecostalism and even goes after Baptist author Henry Blackaby for teaching that God can speak to people today.

MacArthur, who is 74, urges evangelical Christians to engage in a “collective war” to stop the spread of the charismatic movement, which he describes as a “deadly virus,” a “deviant mutation of the truth” and a “Trojan horse” that has infiltrated mainstream Christianity. MacArthur writes, “Charismatic theology has turned the evangelical church into a cesspool of error and a breeding ground for false teachers.”

No one familiar with MacArthur is surprised by *Strange Fire*, since it is really a rehashed version of his 1993 book *Charismatic Chaos*. Unfortunately, some charismatics have given MacArthur plenty of new ammunition to support his case that we are all a bunch of sleazy con artists and spiritual bimbos. Our movement is new and fraught with problems, so MacArthur doesn't have to look hard to find examples of troublesome doctrine. But instead of offering fatherly correction, he pulls out his sword and hacks away.

I'm no five-point Calvinist, but I will make five points here in response to MacArthur's book:

1. Not all charismatics and Pentecostals have embraced errors or excesses. To MacArthur's credit, he quotes charismatic leaders who have addressed legitimate abuses and errors in our movement. But then he writes us off with a broad brush. Actually, the majority of our movement is not in error, even though we all know of doctrines and practices that need correction. There are millions of healthy charismatic and Pentecostal churches around the world that are winning the lost, launching missionary endeavors and helping the poor. And charismatics and Pentecostals are fueling the global growth of Christianity—even with our flaws.

2. We must leave room for the present-day power of God. MacArthur believes God's miracle-working power stopped around 100 A.D. He says healing, tongues, prophecy, visions and other supernatural manifestations described in the New Testament don't work today. MacArthur is particularly irked that

charismatics emphasize speaking in tongues (which he calls “gibberish”); he also complains that we have a “perverse obsession with physical health” (in other words, if you get sick, just accept it because God doesn’t heal anymore). But the New Testament doesn’t tell us that heaven flipped a switch and turned off the Spirit’s power. That is MacArthur’s opinion, not a biblical doctrine.

3. The church needs a fresh emphasis on the Holy Spirit.

MacArthur says charismatics are guilty of an unhealthy focus on the Holy Spirit. He claims that the Spirit points only to Jesus and that we shouldn’t seek the Spirit’s power or presence because He likes to stay in the background. My question: If that is true, why did Jesus teach so much about the Holy Spirit? And why is the Spirit’s powerful work so clearly highlighted in the book of Acts and the epistles? It’s true that the Spirit wants all the credit to go to Jesus, but we are making a huge mistake if we ignore the Spirit or limit His power. The church today needs God’s power like never before.

4. There is a difference between biblical correction and judgmentalism. Anyone who reads this column knows I speak out regularly about whacky practices in our movement—from prosperity doctrines to necromancy to adulterous pastors who say God told them to divorce one wife so they could marry another. I believe we must address sin in the camp. But there is a difference between confronting specific sins and condemning a whole movement to hell. John MacArthur’s book has crossed that line.

5. We should love MacArthur anyway. *Strange Fire* lists numerous ways charismatics are misusing or abusing the Holy Spirit, in MacArthur’s view. But he forgets to mention that one of the important works of the Holy Spirit is to unify and connect the Christian community in deep fellowship. The New Testament urges us to “preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3, NASB), and we are also told that

love is part of the fruit of the Holy Spirit. But *Strange Fire* was not written out of a heart of love.

Still, there is no need to retaliate against MacArthur. He is our brother because we all believe in and worship the same Savior. The best thing we can do in response to this extremely unkind book is to love our brother in spite of his unfortunate bias against us.

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