

**THE STRANGE THEOLOGY OF JOHN MACARTHUR'S 'STRANGE FIRE' - Part six**

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**ARE THE GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT FOR THE CHURCH TODAY?**

**Acts 4:24-31** - "And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, "Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, [25] who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, "Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? [26] The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed'— [27] for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, [28] to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. [29] And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, [30] while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus." [31] And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.

My question today is a very simple and direct one - "And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, [30] while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus"(Acts 4:29-30) - Is it right for the church to pray that way today?

Should we ask, and expect, the Holy Spirit to give gifts of healing, miracles, prophecies, and the like today? Or should we just pray the first part of that prayer in Acts 4 - "....grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness...."(29)?

Basically, there are two schools of thought on that issue. There are those, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, who believe and teach that the miraculous demonstrations of the Spirit's power are no longer operative for the church today. John MacArthur would certainly take this position. The general name for that doctrinal position is **cessationism**. That means that those supernatural operations of the Spirit have **ceased**. Generally it is held that those gifts were given in order to **validate the ministry and credentials of the Apostles so that they would be received and recognized as bearers of divine revelation**.

Because the Apostles were key players - they were bringing the message that was to later be described as the "**foundation**" of the New Testament church (**Ephesians 2:20**) - God backed their words with powerful manifestations of the Spirit's power. But now we have the complete New Testament. **The foundation has been laid**. And those special, **temporary demonstrations** of the Spirit's power are no longer needed or given.

MacArthur makes himself quite clear in "**Strange Fire**" - "**Whenever the New Testament epistles discuss spiritual gifts**, [MacArthur never once discusses the primary passage in 1 Corinthians 14] **the emphasis is on showing love to one another - never on self-gratification or self-promotion (Romans 12; 1 Corinthians 13). As Paul expressly told the Corinthians, 'The manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all'(1 Corinthians 12:7). Though the spectacular sign gifts** [a term used only by cessationists and never once used in the New Testament] **did not continue past the foundational age of the church (a point we established in chapters 5-8** [I read those chapters three times and never found any textual evidence], **believers today are still gifted by the Holy Spirit for the purpose of building up the body of Christ - through gifts of teaching, leadership, administration, and so on...."**

**Justin Peters** states the very same opinion in his lectures at the "**Strange Fire**" conference. The "**sign gifts**" are not for the church today. The **other** gifts are. But these are not. Again, no **textual evidence** is made available.

What I want to argue today is that this position is simply not consistent with the teaching of the Scriptures. However well intentioned, it is a **biased** view that tries to make the Scriptures say things they really don't say.

Certainly I **do** agree that we do have a final and complete and closed revelation in the New Testament Scriptures. I've stated clearly on many occasions that I do not believe there are any **apostles or prophets today who can add to the final revelation of the Word of God**.

While it's largely fizzling out now, there was recently a resurgence of what was known as the **Latter Rain theology of the late 1940's**. Its teaching was there is still **fresh apostolic revelation** available for the church today. And a lot of people were getting blindly swept along in a mad search for some new thing.

I've already stated my views on that kind of teaching. Any time prophecy is used to either **direct people's lives**, or **add to the final teaching of the New Testament** a line has been crossed that the Bible itself says must never be crossed. The Bible clearly says that we are "**not to go beyond what is written**"(1 Corinthians 4:6).

We are soon going to study in this series that the **gift of tongues** and the **gift of interpretation** and the **gift of prophecy**, properly understood and practiced, are no threat to the final and complete and closed revelation contained in the Scriptures. But just because some people err on one extreme doesn't mean I have to err on the other. I want to show that the Bible clearly teaches that the gifts of the Spirit - including the more outwardly supernatural ones - are intended to be a source of blessing and power for the entire church age - **right up to the day Jesus Christ comes again**.

1) **IT IS SIMPLY NOT TRUE THAT MIRACULOUS MANIFESTATIONS WERE RESERVED TO APOSTOLIC MINISTRY EVEN IN THE DAYS OF THE**

## NEW TESTAMENT

It is true that miracles were *a part* of the ministry of the apostles. Probably the strongest text supporting this is 2 Corinthians 12:12 - "The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works."

Paul writes to people who are starting to have doubts about his apostolic authority and reminds them of the signs and wonders performed among them. And in a very direct fashion he calls those miracles the "*signs of a true apostle*." So certainly there is no question that miracles played a *part* in validating the role and ministry of apostles in the New Testament.

But it's just at this point that error can creep in. Just because Paul says miracles are a part of valid apostolic ministry doesn't mean that supernatural gifts are reserved *only* for that purpose. Miracles can validate apostolic ministry and have other purposes as well.

In fact, Paul makes it very clear that miracles and supernatural wonders are definitely not reserved to genuine apostles alone:

2 Thessalonians 2:7-12 - "For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. [8] And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming. [9] The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, [10] and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved. [11] Therefore God sends them a strong delusion, so that they may believe what is false, [12] in order that all may be condemned who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness."

And it's important to remember that Jesus taught the same truth in different words:

Matthew 7:21-23 - "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. [22] On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' [23] And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'"

There are several important truths in these passages that must be kept all together:

- a) ***Yes, the sign gifts are a valid part of apostolic ministry in the New Testament.***
- b) But, ***no, they are not the only signs of apostolic ministry.*** Never forget that the first attesting proof or criteria of New Testament apostleship was that the candidate was an *eye witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ*.
- c) Just as important, ***no, it is not true that the only purpose of the miraculous gifts in the New Testament is to validate the ministry of the apostles.*** We learn that a person can perform miracles and not even be a *disciple*, let alone an *apostle*.

## 2) THERE ARE MANY SCRIPTURAL CASES WHERE THE MIRACULOUS GIFTS ARE UTILIZED IN THE LIVES OF ORDINARY BELIEVERS IN CHRIST

- a) ***We can start right back with the words of Jesus Himself:***

Mark 16:17-18 - "And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; [18] they will pick up serpents with their hands; and if they drink any deadly poison, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover."

- b) ***We find the history of the early church filled with non-apostolic believers involved in the supernatural gifts of the Spirit:***

Consider **Stephen**. The Bible says he was one of the ones chosen to be a deacon - a servant - to some of the practical needs in the church. Yet God used him mightily to perform miracles: Acts 6:8 - "And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people."

The Bible says the same thing about **Philip**. Philip wasn't an apostle either. He was a deacon who chose to tell everybody he could find about Jesus. And God enabled plain, ordinary Philip minister in the miraculous:

Acts 8:5-8 - "Philip went down to the city of Samaria and proclaimed to them the Christ. [6] And the crowds with one accord paid attention to what was being said by Philip when they heard him and saw the signs that he did. [7] For unclean spirits, crying out with a loud voice, came out of many who had them, and many who were paralyzed or lame were healed. [8] So there was much joy in that city."

- c) ***We also know that Paul considered it a normal part of New Testament church life to have the Holy Spirit working the miraculous among the people of God:***

Galatians 3:2-5 - "Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? [3] Are

you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? [4] Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? [5] Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith....”

Paul isn't even *with* these people as he writes. He's talking about the miracles that the Holy Spirit is working *among them*. There are no apostles present with them. Paul's not talking about the miracles done *by* him or *for* him. He's talking about the working of the Holy Spirit in these local churches.

Not only are the people not apostles, they aren't even that solid or mature in their present faith. This confirms what we studied in last week's teaching, that the gifts aren't given out as *rewards for holiness or maturity*. They're *grace gifts to meet human need as people are obedient and faithful and expectant in ministering the life and love of Jesus to others*.

All of these verses speak against the argument of cessationists. The argument they put forward is we should not expect to see the miraculous gifts of the Spirit in operation today because their *purpose* has been served and is now passed. The miraculous gifts validated the ministry of the Apostles and established the foundation of the New Testament Scriptures. Therefore, the gifts are no longer needed today.

And I'm simply saying that, regardless of your denominational background, or personal experience (or lack of it), or theological preference, *that argument will not stand up to the examination of Scripture*. The gifts were *never* intended as the exclusive validating sign of apostolic ministry and they were never *limited* to the apostles in their use in the early church.

### 3) BEYOND ALL OF THIS, THE NEW TESTAMENT TEACHES THAT WE SHOULD EXPECT AND DESIRE THE MIRACULOUS GIFTS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT RIGHT UP UNTIL THE SECOND COMING OF JESUS CHRIST

There are several passages that make this point very clearly:

- a) 1 Corinthians 1:4-8 - "I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, [5] that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge— [6] even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you— [7] so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, [8] who will sustain you to the end, quiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Paul is clear that there was *no spiritual gift missing* in the life of the congregation at Corinth ("*you are not lacking in any gift*"- 1:7). And then notice how Paul links up their *use of the gifts of the Spirit* (5 and 7) with their *waiting for the Second Coming of Jesus* (7 and 8).

Now, certainly they weren't using the gifts properly and Paul would go on to correct those abuses. But he still *ties together* the *gifts* with the *stretch of time between their present situation and the goal they were all waiting for* - the "*day of our Lord Jesus Christ* - that is, the *Second Coming of Jesus Christ!*"

- b) 1 Thessalonians 5:16-23 - "Rejoice always, [17] pray without ceasing, [18] give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. [19] Do not quench the Spirit. [20] Do not despise prophecies, [21] but test everything; hold fast what is good. [22] Abstain from every form of evil. [23] Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Again, it's important to keep these instructions in their proper theological framework. Paul is talking about a certain kind of *congregational lifestyle* that people will practice together. Much of this text goes into explaining how the church will minister the gifts of the Spirit in such a way that people don't "*quench the Spirit*" (19) either by *foolishly exercising them* or by *not being willing to put aside their own prejudices and receive and welcome them*.

They are also not to "*despise prophetic utterances*" (20). This could easily come about, especially if there were those who acted foolishly under the pretense of being "anointed" by the Holy Spirit.

Finally, they are all told *not to be gullible* ("*examine everything carefully*" - 21). Let me say it again. Any movement, denomination, renewal, revival, Bible teaching institution, television ministry, evangelist, Bible teacher, or self-proclaimed apostle or prophet who *sets his teaching, vision, dream, or revelation above the intelligent examination of the body of Christ is not to be followed*.

It matters not how many people are healed, filled, slain, delivered or impressed. The Scriptures are clear. God *demand*s *thoughtful, wise, scripturally-based examination before any teaching or revelation is embraced*. In fact, this is *how* you can tell when the Spirit of God is at work. He *invites examination*. People and demons drive and coerce and deceive. The Holy Spirit works through *truth* and is happy and inviting to have His voice tried and His message examined.

But let's come back to the main point of Paul's words in **1 Thessalonians**. All of those practical words of instruction about properly using and evaluating the gifts of the Spirit are given *within a specific time frame*. And Paul gives that time frame to us in the *twenty-third verse: 1 Thessalonians 5:23* - "*Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your*

whole spirit and soul and body **be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.**

- c) **1 Corinthians 13:8-13** - "Love never ends. As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. [9] For we know in part and we prophesy in part, [10] but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away. [11] When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. [12] For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known. [13] So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love."

The simple point of this whole passage is obvious. ***Love is superior to spiritual gifts.*** And the ***reason*** Paul gives for love's superiority is also obvious. ***Love is eternal, while the gifts are temporary.*** This doesn't mean the gifts aren't important or to be desired. It simply enforces the reason ***why*** these gifts are to be exercised in ***love*** rather than in ***pride*** or ***self-exaltation***. The central engine of ***love*** forces the gifts into the direction of ***ministry*** to the rest of the body of Christ.

**Verse 8** couldn't be clearer. Prophecy will be "***done away.***" Tongues will "***cease.***" Knowledge will be "***done away.***" And sandwiched between these passing gifts are those two great statements about love - Love "***never fails***"(8) and love "***abides***"(13).

**Verses 9 and 10** are the crucial verses for our study today:

**"For we know in part and we prophesy in part, [10] but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away."** Paul says there is an incompleteness in our experience of the Spirit here and now, even with all of the gifts of the Spirit, that will only be done away when Jesus comes and we see Him face to face.

**Verse 12** speaks of that glorious day when the gifts will no longer be necessary - "***For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.***"

There will come a glorious day when we actually have the ***same kind*** of knowledge of God that He has of us. All of the weaknesses and limitations of this present age will have passed away.

John talks about the very same experience: **1 John 3:2** - "***Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.***"

So this passage in **1 Corinthians 13** is important because it tells us ***two things***. ***First***, it tells us love is so important because it will last forever. Pursue love. Grow in love now because it is the very lifestyle of eternity.

But ***second***, the passage is also important because of its ***timing element*** with regard to the usefulness of the gifts of the Spirit. Paul doesn't just say they will pass away ***sometime***. He tells us ***when*** they will pass away: **1 Corinthians 13:10** - "***....but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away.***" They will pass away ***when Jesus comes again***. It is specifically the coming of the "***perfect***" that does away with the gifts like tongues and prophecy and all the others.

Now there are those who try very hard to turn the meaning of Paul's words around. They say that the coming of the "***perfect***" in verse 12 isn't the coming of Jesus but the completion of the New Testament canon. The real problem with that is that it's a ***forced*** interpretation. Let me ask you, ***when will you see Jesus face to face? When will you know fully even as you are fully known?***

No, the only sane and Scriptural conclusion comes from the words of Paul himself. Right after that famous passage about the need for love and maturity he says this: **1 Corinthians 14:1** - "***Pursue love, and earnestly desire the spiritual gifts, especially that you may prophesy.***"

And this study is important because ***nobody*** will grow in desire for the manifestations of the Spirit in his or her life until this unscriptural bias ***against*** their present value and importance is swept away. God ***wants*** you to desire spiritual gifts. God wants ***you*** to desire spiritual gifts. They're vitally important for the body of Christ to do its work in today's needy world.