

**1 Corinthians 4:1-6** - "This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. [2] Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful. [3] But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. [4] For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. [5] Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God. [6] I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers, that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another."

The *details* of this text have nothing whatsoever to do with the subject of the Holy Spirit or His gifts to the church. But there is a *principle* that does apply to the ministry of the Holy Spirit and everything else we discuss from the Scriptures. Notice my use of those terms. There are *details* in this text that *don't* apply. And there is an overarching *principle* in this text that *does* apply.

The *details* of this difficult text have to do with Paul's response to the way these believers in Corinth were latching on to one specific teacher or another. And they were doing so to the point that they were proud of the side to which they belonged. And they tended then to despise any other teacher and automatically write off what he said. Also, if the teaching came from "*their*" designated teacher, they would place that teaching on a higher plane automatically without discerning the actual content of what that teacher said. This is what Paul was referring to in that strange phrase at the end of **verse 6** - "....that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another."

But how was all this error and pride to be avoided? And now we come to Paul's *principle* that relates very directly to the subject at hand. The key for these believers at Corinth, just as it was the key for Paul or Apollos, and the key for the church today - charismatic or non-charismatic - lies in learning and remembering "....not to go beyond what is written"(6).

So the governing principle is *only what is written counts*. That means if others go *far beyond* what is written we mustn't follow them, no matter what tales of blessing and prosperity they can recount. And it also means if others *discount or explain away* anything that is written, we mustn't follow, regardless of their fame or influence or cries of "*heretic!*" or "*fanatic!*" "*What's written,*" says Paul, "*just stay with what's written.*"

John MacArthur has published three books opposing the operation of the "*sign gifts*" of the Spirit in the church today. I'll talk about that term in just a minute. The first, "*The Charismatics,*" was published by Zondervan in 1978. After this came "*Charismatic Chaos,*" also published by Zondervan, in 1993. His newest and most extensive treatment, "*Strange Fire,*" was published in Thomas Nelson in 2013. You'll notice that the last two books, unlike the first, pretty well condemn the movement right in the title.

I'm only dealing with the third book in this series. The arguments are pretty much the same in all three, though the third, in my opinion (I own and have read all three) represents the most current and expansive presentation of the theological position of *cessationism* of the three.

I should explain that term - *cessationism*. Throughout this series the meaning of *cessationism* is the theology that says the *sign gifts* of the Holy Spirit (a term nowhere used in the New Testament, usually said to describe the more outwardly manifested gifts of *tongues, the interpretation of tongues, prophecy, and healing/miracles*) - *those* gifts have ceased and are not available to the church today. Any and all *apparent* manifestations are counterfeit at worst or merely foolish and mistaken at best.

Without getting too much ahead of myself (we'll study all of these points in detail) these *sign gifts*, according to cessationists, were given - as that *non-scriptural* term "*sign*" gift implies - to validate the ministry of those New Testament Apostles. Once the New Testament was completed and we had a closed, absolute revelation contained therein, these gifts were no longer needed and *ceased*. This, cessationists argue, is simply a matter of factual church history. I'll talk more about that down the road.

To be clear, most cessationists *don't* believe *all* the gifts have ceased. Usually, they mean only these *sign gifts*. The other gifts, apparently, aren't a threat to intelligent people. The Holy Spirit is still free to distribute *those* gifts if He wishes. I think this argument is deeply flawed and we'll eventually cover all of that.

The problem with a series like this is figuring out where to begin. There's so much to cover. I will deal with what I consider to be specific *Scriptural misunderstandings* I'm convinced MacArthur and many other cessationists make in future studies. Today I'm going to deal with only two introductory considerations. I want to look at *what I liked about the book* and then *what I didn't like about that book*.

## 1) WHAT I LIKED ABOUT THE BOOK

Yes, some may be surprised, but there were things I appreciated about MacArthur's "*Strange Fire.*" Let me mention just one of them:

*I applaud the critique of many of the heretical extremes exposed in the book.* I think MacArthur is right to say that it isn't loving to allow false teaching unhindered advance through the media. A principle I take to be foundational throughout the Bible is *it is never a loving act to allow people to be deceived.* And there is much deception and abuse out there.

MacArthur's book is a virtual Disney Land of idiotic charismatics, false prophets and apostles, and Word Faith charlatans. As painful as it is to look at some examples, it think it's important for the point I want to make about one of the strengths of MacArthur's book. So bear with me:

**Evangelist Todd Bentley** - *"I said, 'God, I prayed for like a hundred crippled people. Not one got healed.' He said, 'That's because I want you to grab that lady's crippled legs and bang them up and down on the platform like a baseball bat.' I walked up and grabbed her legs and I started going BAM! BAM! I started banging them up and down on the platform. She got healed. And I'm thinking, 'Why is not the power of God moving?' He said, 'Because you haven't kicked that woman in the face.' And there was this older lady worshiping right in front of the platform. And the Holy Spirit spoke to me - the gift of faith came on me. He said 'Kick her in the face - with your biker boot!' I inched closer and I went like this. BAM! And just as my boot made contact with her nose she fell under the power of God."*

**Creflo Dollar** - *"Jesus didn't show up perfect, He grew into His perfection. You know Jesus, in one Scripture in the Bible, he went on a journey, and He was tired....You better hope God don't get tired....But Jesus did. If He came as God and He got tired - He says He sat down by the well because He was tired - boy, we're in trouble. And somebody said, 'Well, Jesus came as God.' Well, how many of you know the Bible says God never sleeps nor slumbers? And yet in the book of Mark we see Jesus asleep in the back of the boat."*

**Kenneth Copeland** - (Pretending to speak for Jesus) *"Don't be disturbed when people accuse you of thinking you are God....They crucified Me for claiming I was God. I didn't claim that I was God; I just claimed that I walked with Him and that He was in Me. Hallelujah! That's what you're doing."*

**Benny Hinn** - (On a "Praise-a-Thon" on Trinity Broadcast Network) - *"Those who put us down are a bunch of morons....You know, I've looked for one verse in the Bible....one verse that says, 'If you don't like 'em, kill 'em.' I really wish I could find it....Sometimes I wish God would give me a Holy Ghost machine gun - I'll blow your head off!"*

MacArthur is perfectly within his rights to point out **Benny Hinn's crazy prophecies** - *That Fidel Castro would die in the 1990s, that the homosexual community would be destroyed in a fire in 1995, and stating on April 2, 2000 that Jesus Christ was going to appear physically in Benny's crusades (and later claiming that Jesus did come but, unfortunately, they lost the video tape that showed Him there).*

Every Christian should be upset when Benny says God told him there were *"9 members in the Godhead."* Or that **Kathryn Kuhlman** visits him from the dead and he gets *anointing from the grave of Aimee Semple McPherson.*

**Rick Joyner** (one of the now disgraced "Kansas City Prophets") - *Predicted that in the 1990's much of the state of California would be swallowed up in the Pacific ocean.*

**Ted Haggard** - In 2006 Haggard resigned as the charismatic pastor of **New Life Church** in Colorado Springs after it was established he had procured drugs and homosexual favors from an escort service for a three year period. I heard Haggard speak a number of times at leadership conferences. He pioneered a new church plant in 2010. In February, 2011, in an interview with **GQ magazine**, Haggard said, *"I think that probably, if I were 21 in this society, I would identify myself as a bisexual."* Many charismatics and non-charismatics are flocking to his new church.

**Peter Wagner and the "New Apostolic Reformation"** - Peter Wagner is the recognized founder of "New Apostolic Reformation." This, according to Wagner, began in 2001, which he describes as the *"beginning of the Second Apostolic Age."*

Wagner's words - *"We are now seeing before our very eyes the most radical change in the way of doing church since the Protestant Reformation. In fact, I think I could make a reasonable argument that it may actually turn out to be a more radical change."*

All of this began for Wagner when *"two prophetesses"* declared he had received an *"apostolic anointing"* in 1995. Not long after Wagner claims he ended mad cow disease in Europe - *"I know that God wanted me to take the apostolic authority He had given me and decree once and for all that mad cow disease would come to an end in Europe and the U.K., which I did....That was October 1, 2001. A month later, a friend of mine sent me a newspaper article from England saying that the epidemic had broken and that the last reported case of mad cow disease had been on September 30, 2001, the day before the apostolic decree!"*

This makes such an easy target for MacArthur. MacArthur writes, *"Given his enthusiasm, Wagner is apparently unaware of the fact that the disease still exists in Europe, such that sixty-seven positive cases of infected cows were reported in 2009 alone."*

In 2009 Wagner formed the *"International Coalition of Apostles"* as the *"Presiding Apostle."* New apostles could join for \$69 a month. MacArthur writes, *"Membership rates at the end of 2012 varied slightly, depending on the apostle's nation of residency. The base fee was \$350 for 'International Apostles.' The fee for apostles living in North America began at \$450 per year, or \$650 for married apostles (meaning, apparently, a husband-and-wife team who both considered themselves apostles)."*

Enough examples. These things *ought* to be exposed. The church *ought* to be both sad and angry. The fact that John MacArthur is so rabidly anti-charismatic in no way undoes the need to have the church - *especially the Pentecostal church* - aware and disgusted with

unscriptural abuses like these and thousands of others.

Make no mistake about it - we of all people ought to be aware of how these things **quench the Holy Spirit**. We should be pointing all these things out long before **John MacArthur** ever noticed them. They **grieve the Holy Spirit**.

One of the key teaching points for us today comes in right here. The Holy Spirit is not just quenched by **anti-charismatics**. This is Paul's point in **1 Thessalonians 5:19-21** - "**Do not quench the Spirit. [20] Do not despise prophecies, [21] but test everything; hold fast what is good.**"

Paul calls for a Scriptural balance. There are **two** ways - not just **one** - to quench the Spirit. There are people who "**despise**" prophecies today. They eliminate them out of hand. They admit no place for the prophetic gift today at all. That's **one** way to quench the Spirit - "**I just hate it when that kind of stuff happens in our church!**"

And that quenching of the Spirit often **leads to another kind of quenching of the Holy Spirit**. In reaction to what they perceive as the **spiritual deadness** of those who "**despise**" certain gifts, others **embrace anything that comes along**. They don't want to miss anything that **might** be the Holy Spirit. They totally ignore Paul's equally emphatic command to "**test everything**" and only hold on to **some of it** - "**what is good**"(21).

And now we're in a better position to see the implications of the full title of this teaching series - "**THE STRANGE THEOLOGY BEHIND JOHN MACARTHUR'S 'STRANGE FIRE' - Why Pentecostals Reject Cessationism and Charismatic Extremism and Embrace God's Word Above All.**"

So yes, something in me rejoiced that MacArthur exposed these abuses in this book.

## 2) **WHAT I DIDN'T LIKE ABOUT MACARTHUR'S BOOK**

In future weeks we'll study what I think are some serious **Scriptural blunders** in MacArthur's argument. I'm not doing that today. I want to wrap up looking at a few **big picture, foundational weaknesses** in "**Strange Fire.**"

- a) ***I don't like the way MacArthur spiritually writes off those whom he criticizes.*** This becomes quite obvious in some of his own words. In a panel discussion at his conference he addressed the criticism that he was **being divisive in the Body of Christ**. In his response MacArthur rather boldly asserts he wasn't "**dividing the Body of Christ. He was defining the Body of Christ.**"

MacArthur clearly states he was **defining** who was in and who was outside the body of Christ. Beside being rather dangerous, what's so **strange** about this judgment by MacArthur is he actually resents it when the same kind of attitude is shown by charismatics toward himself and anti-charismatics.

Here's how he responds in his book to the wacky accusations of self-appointed apostle Peter Wagner. MacArthur writes, "**Those who reject the New Apostolic Reformation are, in Wagner's view, like the Pharisees: '....instead of acclaiming and blessing God's new wineskin, they resist it.' He further asserts that those who oppose his new movement are under demonic influence; 'Satan tries to prevent new times and seasons from coming by sending evil demonic spirits....If they are successful, we begin to think wrongly about the new wineskins that God desires to develop.'** Thus (says MacArthur) **anyone who takes issue with Wagner's premise....is derided as legalistic, demonized, or just too scared to embrace a radical new age in the history of the church.**"

Please don't miss my point. I'm not in any way giving any credence to Peter Wagner's condemning words of his anti-charismatic critics. I'm simply saying MacArthur would look more credible **if he didn't do the same thing**. There has to be a way to dealing with the person's theology on non-salvation issues without condemning that person to hell.

True, some doctrines are **deal breakers**. If you don't get **certain** things right you're not a Christian at all. But the gifts of the spirit and their operation in the church today, though very important, **isn't** one of those deal breakers. It is beneath John MacArthur to say he's "**defining**" the body of Christ in his "**Strange Fire**" book and conference.

Ironically, in a book where his main point is charismatics put all their focus on the Holy Spirit and take their eye off of the centrality of the gospel of Jesus Christ, MacArthur's judgmentalism does exactly the same thing. The body of Christ simply **isn't defined** over the issue of spiritual gifts. He's taken his eye off the saving work of Jesus Christ for charismatics and non-charismatics alike.

- b) ***I don't like the way MacArthur paints charismatics and Pentecostals with such a wide brush.***

In spite of some slight efforts to back-peddle on this, he still puts virtually all charismatics under one umbrella, though he must know there are vast differences. In his book he calls Gordon Fee, Wayne Grudem, Donald Carson, and John Piper either charismatics or continuationists (those who, unlike cessationists believe the gifts of the Holy Spirit **continue** into the present church age). He states and restates that the Word Faith movement that dominates the television empires is the **central core and dominate majority of the charismatic movement**.

In his recent blog *Justin Peters* makes the same claim in his article *"Ignorance is Not an Option."* After pointing out the looney claims and prophecies of Benny Hinn and chiding charismatic author *Michael Brown* for his ignorance of Hinn's foolishness, Peters eventually makes it clear that, *"The errors are extreme to be sure, but they are coming from and they represent the majority within the charismatic movement."*

Besides the repeated confusion of identifying the *Word Faith Movement* with the *charismatic movement* there is another strange thing to notice in Peter's article. In an article devoted to the thesis that the crazy thinking represents the *core* rather than the *fringe* Peters sites *only Benny Hinn* with the questionable theology. Granted, his audience is huge, but does that make Hinn's theology the core of the whole movement?

There are other charismatics - *lots* of them:

*Gordon Fee is Professor Emeritus of New Testament Studies at Regent College.* He has written exhaustive commentaries on *1, 2 Timothy and Titus in the New International Bible Commentary Series, 1 Corinthians in the New International Commentary On The New Testament, and Philippians in the New International Commentary on the New Testament.* He is the author of numerous books, including *"Pauline Christology - An Exegetical - Theological Study."*

These are extremely scholarly works. I mean no disrespect when I say John MacArthur, in a million years, could never write works like Gordon Fee's. Fee is a theological heavy-weight.

*Wayne Grudem is Professor of Theology and Biblical Studies at Phoenix Seminary, Phoenix, Arizona.* He is the author of a massive *Systematic Theology and General Editor of the ESV Study Bible.*

*Donald Carson is a respected professor, author, and speaker.* He is currently *research professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and the president of The Gospel Coalition.* He has a *PhD in New Testament from Cambridge University. He has served as the first dean of the seminary of Northwest Baptist Theological College, now known as Northwest Baptist Seminary.*

*Carson has written over 50 books. In 1997, he received an Evangelical Christian Publishers Association Gold Medallion book award for his book The Gaggling of God: Christianity Confront Pluralism. Carson has commentaries in both The Expositor's Bible Commentary series and the Pillar New Testament Commentary series. He is also the author of New Testament Commentary Survey, 6th ed., How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil, and the titles in The Select Works of D. A. Carson (7 vols.) and D. A. Carson Collection (4 vols.).*

My point in all this detail is any umbrella that has under it *Gordon Fee, John Piper, Donald Carson, Wayne Grudem* - all of whom are *continuationist charismatics* - along with *Benny Hinn, Joyce Meyer, Kenneth Hagin,* and *Joel Osteen* is too big an umbrella. There's simply no meaning to an umbrella like that.

MacArthur has a response. He points out that all of these less extreme charismatics give credibility to the heretics by allowing themselves to stay in the same camp. MacArthur states clearly on page 232, *"....I believe the continuationist position exposes the evangelical church to continuous danger from the charismatic mutation."* And again, on page 234, *"The continuationist position gives an illusion of legitimacy to the broader charismatic movement."* MacArthur actually scolds solid thinking continuationists for not condemning the wacky theology of the Prosperity/Healing/Word Faith movement.

This is nothing short of confusing to me. I *have* an endless selection of material from continuationists like *John Piper* (to give only one of many examples) where he specifically says he *"hates"* (yes, that's the very work he uses) the Word Faith movement. Sane continuationists have *for years* taken their stand against the zany fringe of the charismatic movement.

All of which makes me wonder, how can someone like John MacArthur, who says many of these continuationist theologians are his *friends*, who can he not *know* of their stand against these crazy teachings? Doesn't MacArthur know? Or is there something else going on here?

I think there is. I think, in spite of his words on paper, it isn't enough for these charismatic theologians to voice their critique of the Word Faith movement and others extremes. MacArthur isn't content with that. He wants all thinking people to *come out* of any kind of charismatic theology. He wants them out even if they think their theology is based on the Word of God.

I want to wrap up this point by repeating, word for word, one of the opening paragraphs of this teaching: *"So the governing principle is only what is written counts. That means if others go far beyond what is written we mustn't follow them, no matter what tales of blessing and prosperity they can recount. And it also means if others discount or explain away anything that is written, we mustn't follow, regardless of their fame or influence or cries of "heretic!" or "fanatic!" "What's written,"*

**says Paul, "just stay with what's written."**

- c) ***I don't like the way MacArthur judges the Biblical teaching on the present work and gifting of the Holy Spirit by the worst abuses of it.*** As a simple foundational point for the whole study, **nothing should be judged by its abuse.**

Case in point. There are - by MacArthur's own analysis - **many** false teachers in the church today. There are many pastors and leaders who abuse their teaching role and lead countless people into false doctrine and error. Who could even tabulate the eternal damage done to the Body of Christ by false teaching.

Does that mean we should **ban teaching** in the church? Because this gift is often poorly exercised, should it be eliminated?

The obvious answer to that foolish question is **"No!"** The answer to **false** teaching is **sound** teaching. And the answer to all the charismatic zaniness is the full, Scripturally ordered and informed use of all the resources of the blessed third Person of the Trinity in the Body of Christ.

And, as we'll see, that is **exactly** what the Apostle Paul urged for the church at Corinth. For all the abuses he saw (we'll study them all) it is simply a fact that you will never see him **once** forbidding any exercise of the gifts in that church. May God grant us all the same sound, Biblical wisdom.