

THE STRANGE THEOLOGY OF JOHN MACARTHUR'S 'STRANGE FIRE' - Part seven

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YIELDING TO DIVINE TRUTH WITH BOTH YOUR *MIND* AND *HEART*

1 Corinthians 12:1-11 - "Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed. [2] You know that when you were pagans you were led astray to mute idols, however you were led. [3] Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says "Jesus is accursed!" and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except in the Holy Spirit. [4] Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; [5] and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; [6] and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. [7] To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. [8] For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, [9] to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, [10] to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. [11] All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills."

Look carefully with me at **verse 3** - "Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says "Jesus is accursed!" and no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except in the Holy Spirit."

We read verses like these quickly because that way we don't have to consider why Paul would have written such strange words in the first place. So we can rest our minds by not *lingering* over them.

But let's linger. What insane church situation could have prompted such wild words from Paul? In what world would anyone say "*Jesus is accursed!*," or, in our lingo, "*Damn Jesus,*" in a church gathering? Scholars debate. But most go back to the words Paul penned in **1 Corinthians 3:1-4** - "But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. [2] I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, [3] for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? [4] For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not being merely human?"

Paul has firm words for the way these Christians are becoming "groupies" with different leaders in the church. And Paul has to tell them such divisions are not *spiritual* but *fleshly* (1:3). They need to take a firm stand against these divisions. And so, and this is just speculation, they begin to renounce these party spirits in the church - "*Damn (cursed be) the Apollos spirit!*," or "*Damn (cursed be) the Paul spirit!*, and perhaps, in some moment of thoughtless, overboard exuberance, "*And damn the Jesus spirit!*"

No one knows this for certain. But whatever it was, there was *some* reason Paul felt it necessary to remind this church, "*I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says 'Jesus is accursed!'"*(12:3).

All of this is just an aside. No one knows exactly what prompted Paul to say those shocking words. But, whatever his reason, there *is* a reason to remember them as we begin today's study:

1) **THERE ARE TWO NATURAL INSTINCTS REGARDING THE MANIFESTATION OF SPIRITUAL GIFTS AND EACH MUST BE AVOIDED**

I want to examine this subject by looking at an *attitude of heart* modeled in the New Testament regarding the gifts of the Holy Spirit and their manifestation in the believer and the local church. It's hard for us to even imagine the dimension of foolishness and horror of abuse that was taking place in the church at Corinth as people claimed to be exercising the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Imagine someone standing up in one of our services, supposedly about to give a message of prophecy, when all of the sudden out of his mouth came the words, "*Jesus anathema*" - "*Cursed be Jesus*" - "*Damn Jesus*"

That's what must have, at least on some occasions, taken place in Corinth, or why would Paul have warned and taught against such a thing? It's too bizarre an occurrence for Paul just to have made it up as an example. Why this wasn't stopped can only be explained by people *not* wanting to quench what seemed in the *other* areas of manifestation to have been genuine, helpful giftings of the Spirit in the local church family.

Now go back to the beginning of the book to read some other words of Paul on the exercising of the gifts of the Spirit in the Church:

1 Corinthians 1:3-7 - "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. [4] 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...."

Now remember, as Paul writes these words he *knows* the kind of abuses he's going to have to correct and straighten out later on in this letter. He knows the kind of massive correction that will be called for as he addresses the horrible abuses of these spiritual gifts in Corinth. But you see something in Paul that is all too lacking in the non-charismatic community of Christ today. Please pay careful attention to it. He *teaches* correction while *encouraging* participation.

I want you to see Paul's heart - his words ***under the leading of the Holy Spirit Himself*** - that show such an openness and encouragement even though he knows there will be radical changes needed in the way some of these people are exercising those gifts. He is thrilled - ***still*** thrilled - that they are not ***"...lacking in any spiritual gift...."***

There is a powerful New Testament message in Paul's words. If something like the abuse that was taking place in Corinth happened in the church today here's what people ***would*** say, and ***do*** say - ***"That's it! We will give no place to the manifestations of the Holy Spirit through His gifts in our church. It's too risky. It leads to all sorts of fanaticism. All we need is the Bible!"***

But Paul's words of ***encouragement*** and ***instruction*** regarding the gifts ***are*** Bible. And Paul doesn't ***forbid*** the exercising of the gifts. He ***encourages*** the gifts. Encouraging the gifts is what taking the Bible seriously ***means***. Encouraging the gifts is an important part of what ***"taking the Bible seriously"*** is all about. You ***don't*** take ***all*** of the Bible seriously if you ***forbid*** the use of spiritual gifts.

In order of the way our books appear, here are the last words in the whole Bible on the subject of tongues - ***1 Corinthians 14:39*** - ***"So, my brothers, earnestly desire to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues."*** This is the final word on tongues and prophecy to the church.

We need the Bible's message about the gifts today. Cessationists, by and large, become hard and loveless to the outward workings of the Holy Spirit in His church. On our own, without much teaching and much encouragement, we naturally ***cease to give place - cease to welcome*** - His manifestations.

Especially when it comes to the outwardly manifested gifts of the Spirit, the entire anti-charismatic community tends to evaluate and form their opinions by ***abuses*** of spiritual gifts rather than by the ***Scriptural teaching*** on spiritual gifts. Ninety percent of MacArthur's ***"Strange Fire"*** book and conference is nothing more than an extended expose of lunacy regarding the abuses of spiritual gifts. There is very little actual Bible study.

In this rather strange way they ***abandon*** the Bible they so boldly declare allegiance to. There is not even a reference to ***1 Corinthians 14*** in MacArthur's entire book. The passage that regulates and explains these gifts is totally ignored. But MacArthur doesn't go there. Rather, he unfolds one ridiculous case of abuse of spiritual gifts after another (and certainly, there are plenty to go around!). And then he justifies ruling out the gifts of the Spirit automatically, based on the terrible things that happen when they are exercised in unscriptural ways.

There is something ***backwards*** and ***contradictory*** in the logic of MacArthur's approach. Consider his chastising words to those whom he calls ***"reformed charismatics"*** for not condemning the lunacy of some prominent charismatic voices - ***"By granting credence to the basic premises of a degraded movement, continuationists [logical, theologically minded charismatics] end up surrendering the ability to confront other evangelical leaders who practice bizarre charismatic behavior or make outlandish claims based on supposed revelations from God."***

MacArthur's ***concern*** is good. It's his ***remedy*** that off base and counter-Scriptural. MacArthur says he's worried that ***sane, theologically minded charismatics end up "surrendering the ability to confront" the zany wing of the charismatic movement.***

Yet this is ***exactly*** what the Apostle Paul does in the ***very chapter MacArthur totally ignores in his book!*** Again, notice the typical ***confusion of terms*** in MacArthur's quote. When he says these more theologically minded continuationists have surrendered the ***"ability to confront"*** zany charismatics he really doesn't ***mean "confront."*** No. MacArthur means ***"stop entirely,"*** or, ***"shut down."***

In other words, he means the exact ***opposite*** of what the Apostle Paul did in ***1 Corinthians 12 through 14***. Paul ***did*** confront the abuses at Corinth. But what he didn't do was ***deny the valid exercise of those same spiritual gifts***. That's why MacArthur can't ***afford*** to study Paul's words ***at all*** in his book. He knows he's taking a totally different approach than Paul endorsed or would approve of.

But surely this is a backward, unscriptural and obviously inconsistent approach to the problem. Nobody takes that attitude if ***other*** ministries are abused. Consider the damage done by ***false teachers*** in the New Testament. There are far more warnings against false teaching in the New Testament than there are against poorly exercised spiritual gifts. Is the answer to do away with ***all*** teaching just because some people practice ***false*** teaching? I think we would all say that is a ridiculous solution.

Here's why. We all know that solution is worse than the problem it seeks to correct. We know from ***other important passages that explain and regulate the gift of teaching*** that it is still very important, in spite of all the warnings of its ***abuse*** in the very same Bible.

In other words, you correct ***false*** teaching with ***true, Scriptural*** teaching. No one with any sense would outlaw Biblical teaching in the church just because there are thousands of groups all over the world who are involved in false teaching.

In the same way, Paul would plead with the church today and say that the problem isn't with the gifts. The problem isn't with the Holy Spirit. God's revealed will for the ongoing ministry and benefit of the gifts of the Spirit for the church today is a ***good*** plan. It ***will*** work. But, as with everything else God offers to His people, it must be done in His way. There needs to come a maturing in understanding and appreciating and exercising His gifts in the church according to His perfect plan revealed in His Word.

Paul would say the answer isn't to quench or squish or put a lid on the Spirit's working. In fact, the Bible specifically **commands** that we do not do so. God's way is to build a people of mature love and understanding, who are humble and teachable and correctable, who will welcome and appreciate and grow in the full-orbed ministry of Spirit-filled congregational life. **That's** the Father's will for His redeemed church.

2) **WE ARE NOT LEFT TO GUESS TO WHAT EXTENT FATHER GOD WANTS TO MINISTER THE LIFE AND GIFTS OF HIS SPIRIT IN THE LOCAL CONGREGATION**

1 Corinthians 12:11 - "**All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.**"

Please note this isn't Paul's opinion. This is the stated will of the **Spirit of God Himself**. This is how **He** wants to manifest Himself in the local congregation. There are so many voices that would tell you differently, that somehow God doesn't care all that much about the expression of the Gifts of the Spirit in the church today. Please see two things in this one verse:

- a) Notice the Spirit's longing to express - to **manifest** - Himself in the local church today - "**....all these things are empowered by the same Spirit....**" The Spirit describes Himself as the **driving force**. He desires **increased activity**. He longs to accomplish His sovereign purpose. He hasn't changed that longing since the New Testament was written.
- b) The Spirit longs to use **each person in the church**. Paul says the Spirit gives His gifts "**....who apportions to each one individually as he wills.**"

"Well, I'm ready if the Holy Spirit wants to use me. I won't stand in His way. But I doubt that we should look for too many manifestations of the Spirit anymore, after all, you can't force Him to work, you know. He's sovereign with His gifts. If He doesn't want to move in our church or in my life with His gifts then that's all there is to it"

People use that verse to say the **exact opposite** of what the Spirit of God wants to do. **To whom does the Spirit want to give His gifts?** The verse answers that question very clearly - "**....to each one!**" Here's the stated will of the Holy Spirit - "**I don't want anybody left out! I want to gift the church through you!**" That's what "**to each one**" means. Everyone is included in His divine plan. This whole congregation is made up of "**each ones.**" That's all we have in this building. Get this truth through your mind and heart today - the Holy Spirit wants to channel His life-flow, His power, through **you**

Here's why that is such an important truth to grasp. There's a spiritual life-flow - a dynamic of ministry - that the Spirit of God wants to extend to the body of this church that's never going to come through any of the Pastoral offices, or sermons, or deacons, or leaders, or department heads. The Holy Spirit's specific plan is to keep much of the ministry in the **ordinary hands of the members of this body**. It is never His will to merely pass ministry on to someone else.

This is a fundamental issue in this church. Why do people's needs go unmet in this or any other church? We know **some** of the reasons. Some people aren't in the Word. Some people don't commit themselves to a life of prayer. Some people don't seriously submit their lives to the Lordship of Jesus at some cherished point. Some people never take seriously the call of Jesus to not only **follow** Him, but to **separate** themselves from the world around them. A lot of people just don't go to church often enough or consistently enough. They aren't giving themselves an honest chance to grow with other believers. And increasingly Christians don't like to be **told** this truth about themselves anymore. Some people live with unforgiveness in their hearts toward a brother or sister.

But far more often than any of those reasons is this one: the Holy Spirit looks down on the fractured, splintered lives of people in His church. He has the **resources** to meet that need. What He's looking for is a **distributor** through whom to channel His help and power. And time and time again, through lack of teaching, or an unscriptural, non-charismatic bias, or a lack of faith that God **would** or **could** use them, people become **non-participants** - they **opt out** of God's gift distribution program.

Listen, the Holy Spirit doesn't work in His church like electricity in the atmosphere. He looks for **members of the body** to distribute His gifts to those who need them most. This is the **reason** the church is **called** Christ's Body. It's more than poetic imagery. It's meant to **define** and **remind** and **explain** the way things get done for Jesus in this present world.

Here's the deal. The only body Jesus has to work with on earth is yours! If anybody is going to be Jesus to that wounded person - that lonely person - that needy person - **it's going to have to be you**. That's the plan. It's **you** or it's **nobody**. Jesus isn't **here** physically now. He has no material body on this earth. If He's going to work through a body, it's going to have to be yours. And that's **exactly** why the Holy Spirit desires to gift each member of the church for service and ministry.

3) **ALL OF THE GIFTS ARE FOR THOSE WHO WILL BE RECEIVING THE MINISTRY OF THE GIFT - NOT FOR THE ONE EXERCISING THE GIFT.**

This is true of all the gifts. The gift of faith, just as an example, is not given by the Spirit so somebody can stand up and say, "Wow, I have the gift of faith!" The Spirit gives that gift so you can pray for the one in special need and bring the power of God to bear on that impossible situation. This is the motive of the Spirit in the way **all** the gifts of the Spirit are given.

This is the same with the gifts of wisdom, healings, etc. There are people who will go untouched by God's love and power unless you are

open to distribute the ministry gifts needed in their situation!

Take any franchise like "**Wendy's**", "**MacDonald's**", or "**Burger King**." They don't serve their purpose just because they have a sign up and a truck load of inventory on the shelves. Take **Amway** or **Shacklee** as classic examples. It's not just a matter of having a certificate of distribution in your hand and a garage full of product (that **does** sometimes happen, by the way). The name of the game - the whole object of the process - is to **channel the goods out to the people!** Everything will be useless and a failure without this!

The church works the same way. It is a horrible distortion of the Spirit's divine purpose when we get so **receiving** oriented in our congregations. Nothing is more stifling than this. The Holy Spirit comes to **lift our sights!** There are so many people whom the Lord wants to reach and touch through you. There are **marriages in big trouble**. There are **people carrying more than they can bear**. There are **young people badly in need of a guiding hand**. There are **lonely people who need a companion**.

Listen to me and grab a hold of this truth. God wants to do more through His spirit than tickle Pentecostal people with His Holy Spirit. He wants to use you to pour spiritual health and help and power into the halls, foyer, classes, prayer room, and sanctuary of this church! **That's** the Spirit's call, and **that's** His call to **you!**

4) THE GIFTINGS AND DIVINE LIFE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT ARE NEEDED TODAY EXACTLY AS THEY WERE IN THE EARLY CHURCH

1 Corinthians 12:2 - "You know that when you were pagans you were led astray to mute idols, however you were led."

It is astounding to me that there are still some segments of the body of Christ - though drastically reduced in number from what they used to be - there is still the old position taken that the gifts of the Spirit were only of temporary value and have ceased because they have served their purpose for the church.

Notice Paul's placing of these important words about the nature of the battle and bondage the church faces with the world around it. The people who so desperately need Jesus must never be seen as merely **uninformed**. That is **not** their problem. Before Paul talks about the nature of the power available to the church as Christ's body in this world he outlines the **nature of the bondage this world is in**. This is **why** the ministry of gifts of the Spirit - the **tools** of the Holy Spirit Himself - are so desperately needed today.

People usually get it all twisted around. They talk about Charismatics getting "**carried away**" with their experiences. And I'm not saying for a minute that never happens. But it's not the danger Paul focuses in on in this verse. Paul says there's a much more serious problem - one that frequently gets overlooked in our quest for political correctness. There's a vast segment of the world that is all "**tied up**" in spiritual bondage. He says they're truly the ones who are being literally "**carried away**" - "**led like an animal with a hook in its nose!**"

And I'll tell you something friends - and the church had better learn it well in these last days - **it takes more than information to free them**. The reason the power and gifts of the Spirit are needed today is simply because **only the life of the risen Christ - only His current living touch through His present physical body, the church, can free mankind**.

And this is the whole point of today's teaching. **How** does Jesus touch people today? He wants to touch them through **you!** He has given His Spirit to gift and equip His body, the church, to present Jesus in life and power to those in need.

In our corporate times of **prayer for needs**, in **prayer circles** during Sunday night CrossTraining, as we **share Christ with friends and neighbors**, Paul calls upon the church and urges them, "**You don't function in that helpless realm of darkness anymore. There's a whole crowd of people who are being dragged and led through the darkness - literally 'carried away.'** But you function in a totally different system. You have linked up with the Spirit of God - a God Who doesn't drive and carry away, but Who communicates, loves, leads and invites you into participation in life giving ministry."

That kind of life blossoms and blooms as people - **ordinary people** - called and loved by Jesus - open up - open up in **understanding** (**verse 1** - "**I don't want you to be uninformed about spiritual gifts**") - open up in **freedom** (**verse 2** - "**You used to be held captive and led astray**") - and open up in the power of the Spirit with not only the **words** of Jesus, but the **touch** of Jesus so that He might be loved, honored and glorified above all!