

Biblical Prophecy and Modern Confusion

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 12:7–31; 1 Corinthians 14:1; 1 Corinthians 14:39–40

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It's been nearly five months since the Strange Fire conference, and we've been very encouraged to see how many good conversations have started as a result. The conference dealt with a sensitive, deeply ingrained way of thinking, so the potential to hurt feelings and offend friends was very real. I never took that lightly, but I believed it was important to tell the truth about the charismatic movement and proclaim the absolute sufficiency of Holy Scripture.

One reaction of particular interest to me was from my friend John Piper, so when I was pointed to his [Ask Pastor John](#) podcasts, I was eager to listen. The first thing I'd like to say is how much I appreciated John's kind opening remarks.^[1] It sounded as if, at the time he recorded that podcast, he still hadn't personally listened to the material presented at the conference. That put him in the unfortunate position of responding only to what people were *reporting* was said about him. It seems that those close to John misunderstood certain statements at the conference,^[2] so he responded to what he thought were criticisms and misrepresentations of him and his ministry. Given that context, for him to respond with such gracious and humble remarks makes me so grateful for his friendship and the partnership we've shared in the gospel for all these years. The feelings of love and appreciation are entirely mutual.

Clarifying a Misunderstanding

But just to set the record straight, I wasn't commenting on the relative frequency or conviction with which John preaches on this issue in his ministry. My concern is not that he doesn't seem "exegetically convinced enough to advocate" for the continuationist position with his own flock (though he has expressed his own confusion over this doctrinal issue ^[3]). Rather, I was making the observation that John's commitment to the continuation of the miraculous gifts is a rare error—an anomaly—in his otherwise sound theology. It genuinely confuses me that such erudite and sound-thinking brothers like John Piper, Wayne Grudem, and others could get this issue so wrong. Nevertheless, I know that John has never advocated—and has often criticized—the excesses, abuses, and theological errors that have been associated with Pentecostalism and other stripes of the charismatic movement. For this I have always been thankful.

So I hope that clarifies what I said and why I said it. It's unfortunate that most of John Piper's first podcast was spent on responding to such a misunderstanding, and I'm thankful for the opportunity to correct it.

Redefining Prophecy

Nevertheless, there are some other comments he made in this first podcast that I'd like to respond to. The first has to do with John's belief that prophecy is God spontaneously bringing biblical truths to a preacher's mind. Now, it's good for a preacher to pray for that. But that is not the supernatural gift of prophecy. This illustrates one of the central concerns of my book *Strange Fire*: the charismatic

movement, even down to the most conservative continuationists, has entirely redefined the New Testament miraculous gifts.

In Scripture, prophecy is always presented as the infallible, authoritative declaration of God's inerrant revelation. It was not an impression on the mind, whether clear or vague, but a *verbal* declaration, using words the prophet vocalized audibly or wrote legibly in the presence of others who could hear or read them. Scripture never uses the terminology of prophecy to speak of mystical, intuitive impressions. When continuationists use the biblical terminology of the miraculous gifts to describe something other than the biblical phenomena—when they take a word with a very narrow meaning in Scripture (such as *prophecy*) and give it a new, broad, unbiblical application—that is, when they *redefine* the terms—continuationists tacitly concede the central premise of the doctrine of cessationism, namely, that the miraculous gifts of the Spirit *as defined and practiced in the New Testament* do not occur today. But what concerns me most is that they open the door for falsehood and abuse. They also give cover to false teachers to hijack biblical terms, inject them with strange doctrine, and deceive people.

The Question of Obedience

In another comment John says he advocates obedience to texts like 1 Corinthians 12:31, 14:1, and 14:39. He seems to imply that cessationists are disobedient to those passages. To frame the issue in those terms begs the question. In the first place, cessationist theology allows for the operation of the miraculous gifts at the time Paul was writing Scripture (i.e., before the cessation of divine revelation). But, secondly, the very claim in question is whether the miraculous gifts have continued past that foundational apostolic era. To simply appeal to those texts, which were addressed to believers during a time in which the gifts were operational, and to assume Christians are to apply and obey them in precisely the same way today, John is assuming what he's trying to prove. But if the rest of scriptural teaching instructs us that we are not to expect the continuation of the miraculous gifts after a particular point, then obviously the way we apply and obey these texts will be different for us than it was for the Corinthians. It's precisely at that point that we need to have the discussion. Shallow appeals to superficial-level interpretations won't settle this issue for serious-minded students of Scripture.

Having said that, I'd like to address the texts Piper mentioned in his podcast. Because we began that discussion in the *Strange Fire* book, permit me to quote extensively from the portions of the book that deal with those texts. That'll help us carry the conversation forward. On 1 Corinthians 12:31:

First Corinthians 12:31 is often translated as a command: "But earnestly desire the best gifts." Yet that choice of translation raises a serious question. If spiritual gifts are given by the Spirit's independent prerogative (1 Corinthians 12:7, 18, 28), and if each gift is necessary to the building up of the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:14–27), then why would believers be told to desire gifts they had not received? Any such notion would go against Paul's whole argument in 1 Corinthians 12, where each individual believer is to be thankful for his or her unique giftedness, contentedly employing it in ministry for the edification of the church.

In reality, 1 Corinthians 12:31 is not an imperative. Grammatically, the form of the verb *desire* can also be rendered as a statement of fact (indicative), and the context here supports that translation. After all, there is nothing in the flow of Paul's argument to expect a command, but much to commend the indicative. [Note 28: Charismatic commentator Gordon Fee acknowledges the legitimacy of the

indicative view (Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987], p. 624). Fee lists a number of additional scholars who take that same view.] The New International Version rightly captures the apostle's point in its alternate reading of this verse: "But you are eagerly desiring the greater gifts." The Syriac New Testament similarly states, "Because you are zealous of the best gifts, I will show to you a more excellent way."[\[4\]](#)

And on 1 Corinthians 14:39:

The apostle Paul ended his discussion regarding the gift of tongues with these words: "Therefore, brethren, desire earnestly to prophesy, and do not forbid to speak with tongues. Let all things be done decently and in order" (1 Corinthians 14:39–40). Because all the gifts were still active when that corporate command was written, the Corinthian believers were not to forbid the legitimate and orderly exercise of the gift of languages. The corporate nature of the command is important; this was not a mandate for every individual within the Corinthian congregation to seek the gift of prophecy. Rather, the church as a whole was to prioritize prophecy over tongues—because it did not require translation in order to edify others.

Charismatics sometimes use verse 39 to insist that anyone who forbids the practice of charismatic glossolalia today is violating Paul's injunction. But the apostle's command has nothing to do with the modern imposture. At a time when the authentic gift of foreign languages was still in operation, of course believers were not to forbid its use. But today, it is incumbent upon churches to stop the practice of the spiritual counterfeit. Because unintelligible speech is not the true gift, to dissuade someone from such a practice is not a violation of Paul's command in 1 Corinthians 14:39. Quite the contrary. The disgraceful jumble and irrational blabber of modern glossolalia is actually a violation of verse 40—and those who are committed to decency and order in the church are duty-bound to suppress it.[\[5\]](#)

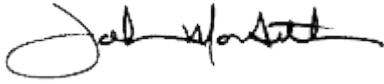
First Corinthians 14:1 is very similar to the first part of 1 Corinthians 14:39, and so should be interpreted in the same way. Thomas Edgar comments:

That 1 Cor. 14 refers to priority of activity in the assembly rather than to the priority of individual desires is obvious, but must be kept in mind in order to understand the verses involved. Therefore, it is the priority given by the church *as a group* to the ministration of gifts in the assembly that is discussed. . . . The phrase "that you may prophesy" definitely refers to the *attitude* of the church as a whole, since the context of 1 Cor. 14 is decidedly against every individual prophesying. Paul has already stated that all are not prophets. The concept that everyone is to prophesy would also invalidate the entire emphasis of chap. 12, viz., that all members do not have the same function. Therefore, 1 Cor. 14:1 must refer to the attitude of the church as a whole.[\[6\]](#)

Finally, even if John or others were to quibble with those interpretations, there is another way to respond to the implied accusation that cessationists are "disobedient" to those texts. Consider how a Christian living under the New Covenant is to obey the commands for animal sacrifice prescribed in the book of Leviticus. Does the refusal to slaughter a lamb on the Day of Atonement mean that a Christian is disobedient to the clear command of the Old Testament? Of course not. Based on what the totality of Scripture teaches about atonement for sin, we "obey" such commands by looking to the perfect sacrifice of Christ, which fulfilled and eclipsed those sacrifices, and by resting in His once-for-all finished work. Similarly, because of what the totality of Scripture teaches about the purpose, function, and temporary nature of the miraculous gifts, the cessationist obeys the commands to "earnestly desire to prophesy" by looking to the perfectly sufficient revelation of the written Word,

which fulfilled and eclipsed all previous revelation, and by resting in His once-for-all finished Word.[\[7\]](#)

In the next *Ask Pastor John* podcast, episode 215, John Piper speaks clearly and transparently about his view of the gift of prophecy. I'm eager to respond and interact with him on that point in the next post, because that is the question at the very heart of the debate. Be sure not to miss the next post.



[1] Piper: "Well, the last thing I want to do is in any way diminish or obstruct John MacArthur's incredibly fruitful expository ministry. I love John. I love that ministry. I have an app on my phone called DownCast, which is for managing your audio podcasts, and I listen to very few people, and John MacArthur is one of them. And that's because his attention to the text, and his love of the Bible, and his ability to apply it in forceful and relevant ways is incredibly helpful to me. And I don't hesitate to tell people, 'Go there and grow.' So anything I say by way of disagreement is not in any sense a diminishment of that. And I continue to benefit from John's ministry to this very hour" ([Ask Pastor John, episode 214, 0:46–1:44](#)).

[2] Interviewer: "Allegedly, it was said that while you do have a category for prophecy and tongues today, and while you are personally open to them, this is an 'anomaly' to your overall theology, and you don't seem exegetically convinced enough to advocate that others pursue prophecy and tongues for themselves. What are your thoughts when you hear something like this?" ([Ask Pastor John, episode 214, 0:24–0:45](#)).

[3] [He describes this issue](#) as one that has caused him the most "heart-wrenching uncertainty" throughout the entirety of his ministry, picturing himself between two stacks of books that take opposite positions on the issue. After reading these books, searching the Scriptures, and praying, he says, "I wind up again and again somewhere in the middle with a lot of uncertainty." (Phil Johnson cited these remarks in his seminar at the Strange Fire Conference, "[Is There a Baby in the Charismatic Bathwater?](#)")

I can understand the difficulty that John expresses there, and I know there are many Christians who struggle with that very same confusion and uncertainty. It's not always easy to make decisions on some of these very complex interpretive issues. But that is precisely why we've dedicated so much time and effort to unfolding the biblical teaching on this issue. *Strange Fire* represents my earnest effort to serve the church by bringing clarity to this complex debate.

[4] John MacArthur, *Strange Fire: The Danger of Offending the Holy Spirit with Counterfeit Worship* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2013), p. 146.

[5] Ibid., 153–54.

[6] Thomas R. Edgar, *Satisfied by the Promise of the Spirit: Affirming the Fullness of God's Provision for Spiritual Living* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1996), 51n14.

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[7] Some may object that this is an illegitimate comparison, since the change from Old Covenant to New Covenant has no counterpart in the cessation/continuation discussion, which takes place entirely within the church age. However, such an objection does not take into sufficient account that the New Testament speaks of (a) a foundational period associated with the ministry of the apostles and prophets, and (b) a post-foundational, post-apostolic period after which that ministry would cease (Eph. 2:20) (cf. Sinclair Ferguson, *The Holy Spirit* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996], p. 229). Anyone unwilling to allow for the continuation of Pauline-type apostles is forced to admit this.