

## Strange Fire Redux, Part 1

Scripture: 2 John 7–11

Code: B141013

*Editor's Note: To commemorate the one-year anniversary of the Strange Fire Conference, we are posting an article by John MacArthur which will appear in the next issue of the [TMS Journal](#). For the purposes of this blog, the article will be posted in three parts throughout the week.*

### Introduction

Southern California has always been a hub of Pentecostal influence. Although the first experiments with modern tongues-speaking took place in rural Kansas in 1901, Pentecostalism became an actual *movement* with the Azusa Street Revival of 1906, in a dilapidated section of downtown Los Angeles.

The first spark was ignited in a private home some two miles northwest of the Azusa Street location. An African American holiness preacher named William J. Seymour was preaching to a small group that had broken away from a nearby church after the elders of that church rejected Seymour's teaching. Indeed, Seymour's knowledge of Scripture and his grasp of essential gospel truth seemed marginal at best. Even the Holiness Church Association with which he was affiliated (no paragon of evangelical orthodoxy itself) considered his teaching dangerously unbiblical. But Seymour was obsessed with the Pentecostal gifts, and one morning, after praying all night long, he began speaking in tongues.

Pandemonium ensued. In the words of one observer, "They shouted three days and three nights. It was Easter season. The people came from everywhere. By the next morning there was no way of getting near the house."<sup>[1]</sup>

The revival meetings soon moved to Azusa Street, where they continued for nine years. People from all over North America and various parts of the world came to investigate the phenomenon. Many became convinced that the glossolalia of Azusa Street signified a genuine revival of the New Testament gift of tongues. Seeds of Pentecostal doctrine thus spread quickly from Southern California all across the nation and beyond.

Early Pentecostalism remained a fringe group, akin to the holiness movement and cousin to most of the perfectionist sects. Pentecostals stood apart from any major stream of historic evangelicalism. The first Pentecostal luminary to gain nationwide recognition was Aimee Semple McPherson, a Canadian-born faith healer and traveling evangelist.

In the early 1920s, Sister Aimee settled in Southern California. She saw the potential of radio for propagating Pentecostal teaching. She also understood the strategic value of Los Angeles as a media center. In 1923, she built (and filled) the 5300-seat Angelus Temple in the Echo Park district of Los Angeles. A year later, she was granted a broadcasting license by the FCC. She ran a 500-watt powerhouse radio station (KFSG), broadcasting through two tall radio towers on the Angelus Temple roof. She thus became the first female broadcast mogul, the first media-driven Pentecostal celebrity,

and the first woman to pastor a megachurch. Sister Aimee's popularity spawned a major Pentecostal denomination, The International Church of the Foursquare Gospel. Today the denomination boasts 60,000 congregations worldwide. The group's headquarters are still located in Los Angeles.

Chuck Smith was a Foursquare Pastor in Santa Ana before moving to Costa Mesa, where in 1968 he founded the Calvary Chapel movement. That fellowship now comprises 1600 congregations worldwide, with hundreds of Calvary Chapels scattered throughout Southern California, and new ones being planted almost weekly.

The Association of Vineyard Churches spun off from Calvary Chapel in Yorba Linda in 1977. Although the denominational office has since moved to Texas, the flagship congregation is still the Vineyard Church of Anaheim. There are reportedly more than 1500 Vineyard churches worldwide.

All those denominations have strong Pentecostal roots. By 1960, Pentecostal teaching and Pentecostal practices had begun to move out of Pentecostal denominations and infiltrate mainline and independent churches. With the broadening of boundaries the word *Pentecostal* gave way to the expression *charismatic*. The former name was laden with parochial connotations; the latter was a term that intentionally crossed denominational and ecumenical boundaries.

Like Pentecostalism, the Charismatic movement traces its roots to an unexpected event during Easter season in an unlikely location in Southern California. St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Van Nuys is just 16 miles as the crow flies from Azusa Street. In 1960 the church was a typical left-leaning Episcopalian parish, not evangelical in any historic sense. Both doctrinally and liturgically, it was at the opposite end of the spectrum from all the Pentecostal churches in Southern California.

But on April 3 (Easter Sunday) in 1960, during the first of three morning services at St. Marks, Rector Dennis Bennett announced to his congregation that he had been baptized with the Holy Spirit and received the gift of tongues. The backlash among congregants and other staff members at St. Mark's was immediate and profound. One of Bennett's assistant priests peeled off his vestments and stormed out of the church in protest. Members of the vestry quickly met and demanded Bennett's resignation that very morning. The controversy escalated as the morning progressed, and during the third service, Bennett tendered his resignation. His presiding bishop later reassigned him to a church in Seattle.

But the excitement in Van Nuys took root and spread. Most charismatic historians see that tumultuous Sunday morning as the start of the modern charismatic movement. It was now evident that Pentecostalism was moving beyond the Pentecostal denominations and beginning to infiltrate mainline denominations and independent churches. To this day the charismatic movement remains a dominant influence—perhaps the single most powerful culture-shaping element—in Southern California's evangelical community.

Non-charismatic churches on the West Coast have been surrounded and under siege by the movement for years. That isn't necessarily true of all communities in the US. Older pastors in the Presbyterian Church of America or the Southern Baptist Association, for example, haven't necessarily been forced to deal with aggressive charismatic influences throughout their whole ministries. They may wholeheartedly share our commitment to the principle of *sola Scriptura*, our belief that the canon of Scripture is closed, and our unshakable conviction that prophesying falsely in

the Lord's name is evil. But in the regions where they minister, the challenge to those principles typically comes from the world, not from within the church. Perhaps it's hard for someone in a context like that to appreciate the difficulty of keeping one's sheep faithful to biblical principles while facing a relentless onslaught of charismatic pressure, propaganda, proselytizing, and hype. I suspect that explains why there was a degree of diffidence from certain corners with respect to the need for a conference the size and scale of *Strange Fire*.

Prior to the 1960s, biblically-based critical analyses of Pentecostal teaching were fairly commonplace and easy to come by. But over the past four or five decades, non-charismatic evangelicals have gradually adopted a laissez-faire stance with regard to charismatic claims. It has been twenty years or so since a significant critique of the movement was published—even though some of the most visible and influential charismatic figureheads (including Joel Osteen, Bill Johnson, T. D. Jakes and an army of the best-known televangelists) are rapidly drifting from anything resembling basic Christian orthodoxy—and they are taking millions of people with them. Charismatic falsehoods (ranging from the rank heresy of the prosperity gospel to patently false miracle claims) have all but silenced the gospel on the movement's leading edge. The full catalogue of charismatic errors is colossal. The worst false teachers in the movement have become its biggest celebrities. Since the heretical districts are where the most numerical expansion occurs, the proliferation of heresy from within has gone virtually unchecked for decades. It is now a massive global problem.

Among more conservative charismatic leaders (and many non-charismatic evangelicals) embarrassed silence has become the standard response to most of the movement's patently false and spiritually deadly teachings. The consensus seems to be that the problem must be swept under the rug in the name of brotherhood and harmony. As critics have been silenced (or silenced themselves) the charismatic movement has been gaining a frightening amount of momentum. (The [Strange Fire Conference](#) was an attempt to sound a clear warning in hopes of slowing the movement enough to give as many passengers as possible an opportunity to jump off.)

The charismatic movement makes its appeal to people at the visceral and emotional level. The promise of the supernatural is a lure that will always draw crowds of people, whether or not they are authentic believers. People crave miracles and paranormal wonders, but that craving is no true sign of faith. (This is one of the central lessons of John 6.) Eastern religions are rife with the very same kinds of phenomena that are touted as gifts of the Holy Spirit in the charismatic movement.

My desire in writing [Strange Fire](#) and hosting the [conference](#) was to make those points, to expose the vast amount of chicanery that has been given a pass by gullible charismatics, and to encourage people to evaluate these issues critically by measuring charismatic claims against Scripture—to be like the Bereans. In that respect, we have certainly seen a significant measure of success. The statement we made was long overdue. Some people were offended, of course, not only because the issue itself is divisive, but also because the charismatic movement has enjoyed such a long moratorium without any significant critique. These days, any word of caution would come as a shock. And let's face it: the truth is usually divisive. Nevertheless, those charged with guarding the flock cannot afford to avoid issues just because they are controversial. The truth must be exalted and error must be exposed. We must teach what is positive and warn our people against that which is destructive (Colossians 1:28).

For every person who was offended, many other people were greatly helped. In the months since the conference, we have heard from countless pastors (and evangelical lay leaders) who say [Strange](#)

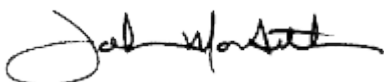
[Fire](#) was a great help and encouragement. Our prayer is that they will be emboldened not only to hold the line but also to speak and teach with a whole heart and deep conviction on this difficult issue. If not, charismatic and continuationist doctrines will continue to spread without any significant challenge, and that would be a far greater travesty than the temporary chagrin of charismatics whose feelings may have been hurt because someone who disagrees with them spoke out.

It should also be noted that the direct response we have received by way of mail has been mostly positive. That surely is to some degree a reflection of the constituency we generally reach. But it is a fact that virtually all the negative response we received from readers and listeners was simply heat without light. Our critics for the most part did not even attempt to give answers grounded in solid biblical exegesis. They did not deal with the major issues we raised. The most common objection was that the conference attacked the whole charismatic movement with too broad a brush.

One of the most visible and vocal critics who first made that charge was Dr. Michael Brown. But just eleven weeks after the *Strange Fire* Conference, Dr. Brown announced that he had made a series of four television broadcasts with Benny Hinn. Over the years, Hinn has been the subject of countless exposés by investigative reporters regarding his fakery and false prophecies. In 2010, he also made headlines with a moral scandal involving fellow televangelist Paula White. (Both of them were in Rome at the time, reportedly to meet with Vatican officials.) Despite many factors that clearly mark Hinn as a charlatan and false teacher to be avoided (see 2 John 7-11), Brown greeted Hinn on the air with an enthusiastic high five, establishing a tone of mutual affirmation and agreement that was carefully maintained throughout all four broadcasts. Pressed by critics and supporters alike to explain his involvement with Benny Hinn, Brown later insisted that he knew of no reason to consider Hinn a false teacher or charlatan.

Brown has likewise either commended or defended the ministries of Cindy Jacobs, Mike Bickle, Reinhard Bonnke, Kenneth Hagin, and other false prophets and prosperity preachers. He cites the explosion of ministries such as those worldwide as “evidence of the work of the Spirit.” Confronted with specific abuses and false teachings, Dr. Brown downplays the prevalence of problems in the charismatic movement. It’s simply inconsistent to tolerate (or worse, defend) false prophets and gospel-corrupters while boasting that the ultra-broad boundaries of charismatic fellowship are a good thing—but then complain that critics are painting the movement with too wide a roller.[2]

The main problem with the broad-brush complaint is whatever variegations appear on the charismatic spectrum are differences in degree, and not type. All essentially affirm the same theology, but they apply it with differing levels of intensity. There are no clear and obvious dividing lines. Even the most conservative charismatics do not seem to want to draw any lines of division. They can’t, for fear that they might unintentionally subvert some “new move of the Holy Spirit.”



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[1] Vinson Synan, *The Century of the Holy Spirit: 100 years of Pentecostal and Charismatic Renewal, 1901–2001* (Nashville: Nelson, 2001), 49.

[2] Dr. Michael Brown disputed the accuracy of these comments as originally worded, so the second and third paragraphs from the end this article have been revised and corrected.

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