

## The Elephant in the Strange Fire

Scripture: Galatians 1:8–9

Code: B141103

*Two years ago this week, Grace to You hosted the Strange Fire conference at Grace Community Church. Coinciding with the launch of John MacArthur's book Strange Fire, the conference featured a comprehensive critique of the charismatic movement and the blasphemous abuse of the Holy Spirit that goes on under its purview. While the response to the conference was overwhelming, many of the issues that were raised have yet to be seriously acted upon. Our goal is to fan the flames of this important discussion and continue the call for discernment and discipline in the charismatic movement. To that end, we want to rerun some of the important articles from before and after the conference, and encourage you to visit the [Strange Fire website](#) for all the sermons, articles, and videos from that landmark event. –GTU Staff*

It's been just over a year since the highly publicized and controversial Strange Fire conference.

As a Grace to You employee with a charismatic background, I watched the buildup to the conference with a considerable amount of interest. I am certainly no stranger to the grievous damage caused by reckless false prophecies in the charismatic church. But since none of that spiritual fallout ever touched me personally, my animosity for the movement did not run deep. In fact, the major gripe I had with my old mainstream Pentecostal church was the same gripe I have with the church growth and emergent movements—a failure to rightly preach the gospel.

But as Strange Fire approached, I had the opportunity to study the charismatic movement with much closer scrutiny than before. In particular, I investigated several influential charismatic leaders, consuming an unhealthy amount of their videos and writing.

That investigation revealed a clear pattern that charismatics follow when engaged in debate. It's almost a codified playbook of sorts for their self-defense (call it *Foxe's Book of Charismatics With Hurt Feelings*), and it goes like this:

- Dogged insistence that the gifts of prophesy, tongues, and healing continue to the present day.
- Vague anecdotal evidence in support of the continuation of those gifts.
- Unshakable confidence that the worst charismatic abusers and charlatans represent only the renegade fringe of the movement, and that they wield limited influence among mainstream charismatics.
- Staunch refusal to name, criticize, or publically disavow those abusers and offenders at the supposed fringe of the movement.
- Dire warnings that rejecting anyone who claims to speak on behalf of the Holy Spirit or wield His power is tantamount to rejecting the Spirit Himself.
- Total disinterest in discussing or debating any doctrinal or ecclesiological issues other than continuationism versus cessationism.

-Confident assertions about the explosive growth of the charismatic church worldwide, and blithe acceptance that everyone who claims to be a charismatic is an authentic believer.

For many charismatic apologists, their self-defense doesn't even extend that far. For them, the debate begins and ends with continuationism, so that's all they ever want to talk about. In fact, most of the responses to *Strange Fire* have amounted to little more than reviving certain authors' greatest hits in defense of the continuation of the apostolic gifts.

What's important about that is this: *Strange Fire* was not primarily or even significantly about cessationism. Yes, it's true that one of the keynote sessions made a biblical case for the cessation of the apostolic gifts, while others defended cessationism as the historical position of the church. But it still constituted only one part of a broad response to the charismatic movement as a whole.

In fact, if continuationism was the only issue in the charismatic movement that John MacArthur and the other *Strange Fire* speakers were concerned about, there likely never would have been a conference or a book to begin with.

Instead, *Strange Fire* addressed the rampant abuse of the Holy Spirit, the perversion of Scripture, and the danger charismatic teaching and practice represent to hundreds of millions of people around the world. It covered an array of theological and doctrinal issues, and it raised several important questions that charismatics need to address.

And yet a year later, the responses to the conference continue to focus on defending the continuation of the gifts. It makes you wonder whether charismatic leaders are defiant or merely deaf.

So in the interest of advancing the conversation beyond the endless defense of continuationism, let us table that part of the discussion. If it helps, imagine that we've conceded that point of debate. (We haven't, but that's beside the point at the moment.) There still remains a whole raft of questions and issues that need to be addressed. Questions like:

- Is there any statistical evidence that proves the so-called "lunatic fringe" of the charismatic world is not actually the mainstream of the movement? Compelling statistics were produced at *Strange Fire* that indicated the prevalence of prosperity theology in mainstream charismatic churches. Can those numbers be contradicted, or is it time to reconsider who is truly on the fringe?
- What is the responsibility of charismatic leaders to police their own movement beyond the walls of their individual churches? Who will be willing unequivocally to call out heretics and charlatans? And why are so many charismatics comfortable with false teachers serving as the face of their movement?
- What constitutes the true, biblical gospel? And what deviations from it qualify as apostasy and heresy? In particular, how do you make sense of the rise of charismatic expressions in the Catholic Church? Is it possible to receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit while continuing to reject the biblical gospel?
- Is Oneness Pentecostalism heresy? Or is perverting the doctrine of the Trinity not really such a big deal after all?
- How are manufactured experiences—like seeding air conditioning vents with gold flakes and

promoting man-made prophecies—helpful or encouraging for true spiritual growth? Why should the proliferation of phonies give anyone confidence that the real thing even exists?

-Is the prosperity gospel biblical? If not, doesn't it fall under the curse of Galatians 1:8–9?

-When it comes to Scripture's instructions and prohibitions for life in the church—for example, Paul's clear teaching about female pastors, or his admonition for only one person at a time to speak in tongues—how seriously do we need to take those things today? Again, are these matters worth dividing over?

-Does the gift of tongues as practiced in charismatic churches today bear any resemblance to the supernatural events on the Day of Pentecost, or any other expression of the gift of tongues found in the book of Acts? If not, why is the dramatic difference acceptable for continuationists?

-If today's prophets are not held to the biblical standard of one-hundred percent accuracy, what standard is there for people who make false prophecies? Or is modern prophecy nothing more than a crapshoot?

-Finally, in the immediate aftermath of Strange Fire, Phil Johnson made an appearance on Dr. Michael Brown's radio program. Phil issued Brown a challenge—which Brown accepted—to produce any audio of Mike Bickle or someone of similar influence in the charismatic movement making a clear presentation of the gospel. We're still waiting for that audio.

We want to see someone—*anyone*—from the charismatic side take up those important issues. Until then, the persistent debate over cessationism and continuationism feels like little more than a deliberate diversion.

If the charismatic movement were truly as vibrant and Spirit-filled as charismatic apologists claim, John MacArthur would never have needed to host the Strange Fire conference or write the book. The issues he and the other speakers raised at Strange Fire should have been dealt with decades ago by charismatics who were faithful to the biblical gospel and recognized the need to address the many perversions that were gaining traction.

Our preference still is for those faithful believers within the movement—who hold fast to Scripture and love the truth—to step up and clean house. Consider these our suggestions about where they might want to start.

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